

THE GANG'S ALL HERE: Parents take part in an infant-massage course in Miami

saged preemies are discharged to their parents an average of six days earlier, shaving \$10,000 off their hospital tab. With 400,000 premature babies born in the U.S. every year, the potential cost savings are apparent. And eight months after birth, Field says, massaged preemies have superior motor skills and mental development.

For much of this century, the prevailing thought was that pre-term babies should not be touched, since the slightest shock could prove fatal. Ever so slowly, the medical establishment has been warming to the idea that massage helps sickly babies. Yet only a handful of hospital nurseries in the U.S. offer massage to these tiniest of patients. Hospital administrators remain skeptical of claims about its therapeutic value, and since most managed care organizations don't cover baby massage, there's little incentive to start pilot programs. Besides, harried nurses can barely handle the steady stream of critically ill infants with special needs, much less find time to give thrice-daily rubdowns.

But thousands of parents of healthy babies aren't waiting for the medical establishment to jump on the bandwagon. For today's upwardly mobile parents, baby massage is becoming what Lamaze was to the previous generation. Classes that teach parents Swedish and Indian massage techniques to use on babies are springing up around the U.S., often with long waiting lists. Inner-city teen mothers are learning baby massage in special pilot programs to build parenting skills.

Teijeiro and his wife Neyda, 33, attended a five-session infant-massage course at South Miami Hospital. Each parent in the group started out by looking into the baby's eyes and asking "Is it O.K. for Mommy and Daddy to massage you?"

The babies couldn't respond, but their cues were unmistakable. Crying, flailing arms, hiccupping and clenched fists meant thanks but no thanks. Others flopped on their stomachs like old pros and were reluctant to leave when the session ended.

The tender, loving touch of a parent has long been recognized as a primal need. But today, with horrific tales of child abuse in the news, some adults are becoming increasingly uncomfortable about touching youngsters. "We've become such a litigious society," Field says. "Children are touch deprived." Infant massage may not be the cure-all for that. But it's a start.



PHOTOGRAPHS FOR TIME BY CINDY KARP—BLACK STAR

Touch Early and Often

Increasing numbers of parents and doctors decide that massage is good medicine for babies

By TAMMERLIN DRUMMOND MIAMI

HUDDLED IN A PLEXIGLAS INCUBATOR, 1.6-kg Andreah Moran is, at nine days, so fragile that she looks as if her twig-thin arms and legs would snap from one false move. But gingerly navigating the tangle of blue electrodes attached to the infant's chest, John Dieter, a researcher at the University of Miami's Touch Research Institute, firmly massages those arms and legs and rubs Andreah's back and her tiny head. The baby sighs, parts her withered lips and begins a slow drool.

Infant massage? It sounds more like a New Age ritual than an internationally recognized alternative therapy. But studies at the Touch Research Institute have found that preemies massaged three times a day for as few as five days consistently fare better than equally frail babies who don't get massages. Full-term infants and older babies also benefit from them. The International Association of Infant Massage, which held its annual conference last month in Orlando, Florida, estimates that 10,000 parents took infant-massage training last year. New converts say it helps their babies sleep better, relieves colic and helps hyperactive children relax.

All of which can be a godsend for anxious new parents. "We've got results already," says Luis Teijeiro, a 38-year-old Miami resident who began massaging his 11-week-old daughter Alissa in June. "Before, her fist was always clenched so tight she was like a little boxer." Now when Alissa wakes up crying in the middle of the night, he massages her. Within minutes, she falls back to sleep.

Dr. Tiffany Field, a Miami child psychologist who founded the Touch Research Institute six years ago with a \$250,000 grant from Johnson & Johnson, says massage stimulates the vagus nerves, which then trigger processes that aid digestion, among other things. As a result of their speedy weight gain, Field says, mas-



A preemie gets the magic touch

Preemies massaged three times a day for as few as five days:

- ARE MORE ALERT
- SLEEP BETTER
- GAIN WEIGHT FASTER