



PICTURE: MICHAEL O'BRIEN

A stroke of love

Research shows touch is a powerful tool - babies thrive on it. **Monica Videnieks** reports.

Touch is one of the most effective ways of communicating with your baby. And if you do it sensitively, the rewards will last a lifetime.

Baby massage, ranging from the simple act of holding your baby, through to more precise stroking techniques, has been shown to help in not only a child's physical development, but is also credited with arming children with vital, life-long emotional and cognitive skills.

An increasing number of new parents are turning to physiotherapists and accredited baby massage therapists to learn the skills of infant massage, often to help settle their babies. Touch has been shown to help babies feel loved, secure and

comfortable and it can also help parents become more confident handling their child.

State Child Development Centre senior paediatric physiotherapist Helen Beaton explains that while effective massage is immensely comforting to babies, particularly in helping to calm infants, parents also benefit through the release of bonding hormones, such as oxytocin and prolactin. In the case of breastfeeding mothers, touch stimulates milk supply.

Through a combination of massage strokes (with or without oil), rocking movements, cradling, singing and — with more active older babies, safe "rumble tumble" fun time — Beaton says parents can encourage maturation of their babies' central nervous system, which can ease colic and painful

trapped gas. Massage also helps teach infants to regulate their own stress, increases bonding and aids communication skills.

"Researchers have discovered that infants take their behavioural cues from their mother's and father's behaviour towards them," Beaton explains. "Adult relationships reflect the type of attachments that were formed in infancy — people whose infancy was secure, were held, listened to, had good contact and were generally cherished by their parents, tend to develop healthier relationships with other people."

"This sort of appropriate, loving and bonding touch between parents and their babies can give children the really essential skills they need to cope with life."

A recent Japanese study found that babies whose backs were stroked after their evening bath developed self-soothing techniques and learned to sleep better than the group of babies who were not massaged.

And Beaton says the philosophy behind baby massage should continue to be used in older children. This can include simple acts such as gently brushing a child's hair before bed or giving soothing back or tummy rubs. "It's about mutual learning and trust between parents and their children," Beaton says.

Children with an intellectual or physical disability particularly thrive from baby massage and some mild physical conditions can be corrected with the help of massage. But Beaton says parents of special

needs children should seek the advice of a physiotherapist specialising in paediatric health in order to learn the most suitable strokes.

Preparing for baby massage (infants/young babies):

1. Turn off distracting noises and get comfortable.
2. Watch baby for "permission". Cues from baby that they are willing can include: eyes widening, smiling, sustained eye contact, hands open or arms reaching out to parent. If baby shows disengagement cues — such as yawning, grimacing, back arching, eyes turning away or tense arm or leg movements, baby is not ready or may need a short break.

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BABY MASSAGE TIPS

To begin massage:

1. Cradle baby's head gently with one hand. With your other hand, lightly stroke baby's back in a circular motion. One movement per second.
2. Stroke in a sweeping motion from the top of the shoulder to the bottom of the spine. One movement per second.
3. For a head massage, cradle baby's head and gently make circles on the scalp, taking care over the soft spots (fontanelles). One movement per second.

- Initially, your baby may tolerate only one to five minutes of massage. Newborns to eight-week-old babies will be content with five to 10 minutes, a three to nine-month-old infant will often accept a 20 to 30 minute massage, while toddlers are usually too active to last more than 15 minutes of massage.
- The best time to massage babies is when they are awake, alert and quiet.
- Oils can be used as a lubricant but are not necessary. If using an oil, ensure it is edible, without scent and take care with products that you or the baby may have allergies to. Almond, olive and apricot kernel oils are recommended (avoid nut oils which can cause skin allergies). Babies can be massaged with or without clothes but ensure they are comfortable and warm.
- Contact your local child health nurse or maternity hospital for information on how to do baby massage. The guidance of specialist paediatric physiotherapists should be used if your child has special needs, developmental concerns (an intellectual disability) or was a pre-term infant.

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