

Baby Massage: A New Addition

By Michelle Kluck

Many people are asking what baby massage is all about and why babies need to be massaged. It is indeed one of the most valuable and significant techniques a parent could ever learn. In today's fast-paced world, massage therapy and the importance of touch to the development of healthy, happy children is a hot topic in both the medical and spa industries. As more parents understand the importance of early involvement in their child's development, interest has grown in how massage therapy can soothe babies' discomforts and help parents bond with them. Numerous hospitals now offer baby massage classes to new parents as part of their prenatal programs, many spas are including baby massage workshops in their regular spa service menu and several cosmetics companies are launching baby product lines with the well-being of both mother and baby in mind.

Soothe and Communicate

Baby massage is one of the most effective ways to soothe and communicate with a new baby. Because touch is one of the most essential elements to a baby's healthy physical and psychological development, all babies *need* to be touched to develop basic security.

Touching a baby is also among the fundamental elements of early bonding, which is the basis for later parent-child attachment. Baby massage workshops led by Certified Infant Massage Instructors teach parents simple massage therapy methods for everything from helping alleviate baby's colic and excess gas to simply soothing a restless baby to sleep. Better still, in the process of massaging their baby, parents learn how to communicate non-verbally with that child in a very intimate and long-lasting way.

Through massage, parents can learn techniques to relax their baby's entire body, relieve many common physical discomforts, nurture and interact with their baby and, of course, bond with their new baby by showing their love and affection with the power of touch.

Clinical studies show that baby massage can be one of the essential elements of the child-parent bonding process. Following is an excerpt from Michelle Kluck's book *Baby Massage: The Knead to Nurture* (Running Press Book Publishers, to be released in early 2003).

Why should I massage my baby?

Baby massage, one of the easiest and most effective methods of early interaction with your baby,

has tremendous benefits for both you and your baby. Through your healing touch, you communicate love, security and comfort to your child. In addition to the physical benefits for your baby, massage helps you tune into your baby's body language and learn to interpret his moods, feelings and needs. As you become intimately acquainted with the look and feel of your baby's body, you'll be better able to detect changes and problems. As you teach him how to relax, you're preparing him to face the world with an early stress prevention program that will be invaluable in the years to come.

Benefits for baby:

- Enhances communication and nurtures the parent-child bond
- Relaxes and soothes baby's nervous system
- Strengthens and regulates baby's respiratory, circulatory and gastrointestinal functions
- Relieves gas and constipation
- Reduces colic
- Reduces pain associated with teething

PMPR Cosmetic Forecast 2003/2004

- Encourages sleep
- Improves baby's muscle tone and motor skills
- Promotes faster weight gain
- Enhances baby's sense of touch and provides a wealth of fascinating sensory experiences
- Stimulates the brain and contributes to mental growth and development
- Promotes a healthy body awareness and self-confidence

“Touching a baby is among the fundamental elements of early bonding.”

In a study conducted by Tiffany Field at the University of Miami's Touch Research Institute, 20 premature babies who were massaged for 15 minutes, three times a day for two weeks, gained 47% more weight and were discharged six days earlier from the hospital—with a hospital cost savings of \$10,000 per infant—than babies who were not massaged. The babies who were massaged appeared more alert and active and showed more mature neurological development

than babies who were not massaged.

Benefits for parents

- Promotes parent-child bonding
- Enhances intimacy, understanding and parents' ability to nurture
- Improves communication with the baby
- Involves fathers; fathers today are taking an increasing interest child-rearing and baby massage provides an opportunity for him to be more involved in the active care and nurturing of his baby; just as nursing helps mothers bond with their baby, baby massage helps fathers literally keep in touch and bond with their newborns
- Helps parents of premature and special needs babies who remained in the hospital after birth; massage is extremely beneficial for premature babies who have been separated from their mother and also for special-needs infants whose mental, visual, hearing or developmental impairments make bonding more difficult
- Massage techniques are used by many hospitals to ease the physical

discomforts baby may experience.

- Time spent reconnecting through massage can help parents focus back on home life and help babies feel secure and supported when babies they are in day care

A strong bond

The bond between a parent and child may be one of the strongest and most important of human attachments. Nurturing a secure attachment between you and your baby is essential to the healthy development of your baby's sense of self and security in the world. Baby massage involves the most important elements of bonding and offers the ideal interaction between you and your baby to build a bond of trust and love. When you massage your baby, keep these essential elements of bonding in mind.

Skin contact—touching.

Communicating with your baby through touch is actually a natural continuation of the massage that takes place in the womb. Skin sensitivity is one of the earliest developed and most fundamental functions of the body. As early as eight weeks of age in the womb, human embryos have already begun to develop a sense of touch. During labor, a mother's contractions provide massive stimulation to the

baby's skin, sending messages to his nervous system and lungs to begin breathing. Baby massage continues this instinctive language of communication and provides significant benefits for your baby.

Eye contact. Eye contact is an essential connection for your baby's early attachment. Newborns focus their eyes at about 7 to 12 inches, which is about the distance you can hold them comfortably. This is also the ideal distance for face-to-face interaction during a massage. Babies can recognize color and are especially attracted to the human face. It seems that babies are actually programmed to see you. Eye-to-eye contact is a vital element in human interaction. It is a form of communication that nurtures the emotional bond between you and your baby.

Verbal communication—“parentese.” Since the seventh month of pregnancy, when a baby first responds to sound, your baby has been listening to your voice and can distinguish it from others. Parents instinctively change their speech patterns when talking to their baby and the high-pitch voice they often use fits with babies' natural attraction to higher frequency speech. As you massage, talking softly or singing will relax your baby. Infant researchers believe that singing affects more of the brain centers for language than

music without words. Singing also has been shown to help with language development.

Odor—baby's sense of smell. Newborns already can distinguish and recognize different scents. By six days of life, babies can recognize the smell of their own mother. During massage, the familiar scent of a mother is comforting to the baby. For this reason, it is recommended to use unscented massage oil.

Additional bonding elements that are enhanced during massage include maternal hormones and body warmth. Close contact with your baby can initiate the release of the maternal hormones oxytocin (the “let-down” reflex) and prolactin (to produce milk). In addition, temperature regulation occurs with close contact with your baby.

Technique

A baby massage routine usually includes massage of baby's tummy, chest, face, arms, legs and back, as well some simple movements to improve baby's flexibility and coordination. The strokes are gentle and soothing, and the pressure used is light yet firm. Babies usually find very light pressure to be ticklish and will prefer a firmer touch. Baby massage strokes are easy to learn and can be done by anyone, including siblings and other relatives. In fact, baby massage is a great tool for bringing families

closer to the new member of the family.

While baby massage may be new to many parents, its extraordinary benefits have been a part of care-giving traditions for centuries all over the world. In India, mothers regularly massage their infants and pass these techniques on to their daughters. In Nigeria, mothers rub their babies with a wet loofah sponge that has been dipped in an herbal mixture. In Bali, infants are regarded as holy and are massaged for the first six months of their lives. The Chinese have integrated infant massage into various holistic methods for hundreds of years.

“Touch is an essential element to a baby's healthy development.”

Now, don't let history or the medical applications become daunting. You don't need to be a physician or a massage therapist to use the basic techniques of baby massage. In fact, baby massage techniques are intended for the novice who may know little about massage—and perhaps just as little about parenting, if this is their first child.

Continuous Nurturing

In today's hurry-up world, it's easy to neglect touch, especially with children. Baby massage can help parents change all that by

PMPR Cosmetic Forecast 2003/2004

bringing touch and gentle stroking into their child's life on a daily basis. It is worthy to note that cross-cultural studies show that babies who are held, massaged, carried and rocked regularly grow into less aggressive adults that are more cooperative and compassionate.

"As a child grows, parents can use massage to nurture well-being."

Baby massage nurtures a child's physical, emotional and spiritual harmony. And massage doesn't have to end when babies become toddlers. As a child grows, parents can continue to use massage as a tool for nurturing and maintaining their child's health and well-being. It's easy to see how by combining touch, intimacy, play and care-giving, baby massage provides tremendous physical and psychological benefits for your child and builds the foundation for a relationship of trust and love.

The bond between a parent and baby may begin at birth, but it's a connection that will develop and mature over a lifetime. For that reason, enjoy this special time with their child. This is your chance to touch your baby with your hands and your heart. **PMPR**

Michelle Kluck is the founder of Basic Knead. An expert in the field of massage therapy, she is the author of Hands-on-Feet: The New System That Makes Reflexology A Snap! (Running Press, 2001) and Baby Massage (Running Press, 2003). An active member of industry associations, Kluck regularly consults with numerous publications and appears on television to discuss the benefits of massage therapy.
www.basicknead.com