

## Infant Massage

Infant massage seems to be sweeping the USA at the moment. Its popularity has exploded within the last few years, much of which is due to Vimala McClure, founder of the International Association of Infant Massage (I.A.I.M).

More and more people are being trained to teach this art to those who need it most, such as Mothers, Fathers, Grandparents and Guardians. But, equally important are the people who care for children outside the home. For instance, nurses on Intensive Care Units caring for premature babies, and those people who work with the disabled are just two groups who bless the lives of little ones with their gift of touch. Massage benefits all babies, but is particularly helpful to these infants. I believe one of the most startling statistics of infant massage research so far is that massage can help increase weight gain in premature infants by as much as 47%! It is now a proven fact that not only can touch help an infant, but premature babies who receive Kangaroo Care (the practice of holding your diapered baby on your bare chest, if you're the father, or between your breasts, if you're the mother) are more likely to leave the hospital before preemies who weren't cared for in this manner. This is simply one more testament to the benefits of touch. It is a sad realization that in today's society, though many people can testify to something's worth, and the added benefits it brings to them and those around them, it will not be trusted until it can be proven scientifically. On the positive side, it also means that there is more and more information available for those people interested in massage and its benefits. As with most natural healing techniques, such as Babywearing, Cloth Diapers and Natural Parenting; Infant Massage is by no means a new trend. People have been massaging babies for centuries. Like many things, it seems the U.S. is slow to come around, however, we are learning. In culture, the "healing arts" are not automatically accepted, despite being practiced for thousands of years through out the rest of the world. Although relevant research has been undertaken, there is a huge upsurge in the amount of scientific research being done to prove or disprove the benefits of massage, touch and infant massage. The Benefits of Infant Massage. From the outside looking in, it can seem like there isn't much going on in a baby's world. To the contrary, it is a new, exciting and challenging time for them. Although it may appear all they do is eat, sleep and demand attention (at least this is what my 4 year old thought), with a regular diaper change thrown in for good measure, they are actually learning more now than they will ever learn again in such a short period of time. If you ever wonder why it can take time for little ones to adjust, imagine their confusion. They've been thrust "rudely" from a state of tranquility, warmth and comfort into a world of changing faces, cold winds, warm baths and everything else that you and I see and experience daily and barely seem to notice. The benefits of Infant Massage can be grouped into the following main categories: Relaxation. Relief. Stimulation. Interaction.

You may think that RELAXATION is not necessary for a baby - after all, what worries do they have? But, as we've already established, there is much going on in a new baby's life. Stress is normal, in everyone's life, and unfortunately, infants aren't immune. Stress is what ensures we get up in the morning. It has been found that all humans, from babyhood to old age, survive best in a period of high stress, followed by a period of deep relaxation. However, we as a people have seemingly forgotten how to relax. There is always something that needs to be done, a deadline to meet, or a call to make. Babies can pick up on this, and because we don't demonstrate relaxation, they cannot learn to relax. Massage can help ease the muscles into relaxation, and when practiced on a regular basis, teaches the infant what relaxation is and how to relax on their own. Caring, loving touch is good for everyone, especially infants who are new to the world and need the reassurance of someone special being there for them. Massage can be beneficial to the caregiver as well, by increasing awareness of the baby, understanding their baby's needs, and thus, aiding in the bonding process. And, by taking time out to gently massage baby, getting to know every inch of that beautiful body and just "being" with the baby, the caregiver will usually de-stress as well. (How could they not?)! It isn't unusual for a baby to experience pain. Colic and/or Reflux can be a nightmare. There are massage techniques and certain oils that can bring RELIEF from this pain and discomfort of spasm or gas. These massage strokes can help to disperse gas, ease muscle spasm, tone the digestive system and help it to work more efficiently. There are also massage techniques that can help relieve the pain associated with teething, and ease emotional stress as well. Many of the oils also release a wonderful soothing aroma to calm the infant. Massage is not a miracle one stop cure, and can take a few days to ease, but in my experience it can be more effective than any pharmaceutical remedy on the market today. Of course there can be other considerations - for example, the mother's diet can be a factor if baby is breastfed, therefore it is wise to examine the possible causes in addition to giving a regular massage. It may seem that STIMULATION can be incompatible with relaxation, but massage actually does both, all depending on the mood, setting, oils and your intentions. Generally speaking, most adults would be looking for relaxation when going for a massage, and would want the same for their infant. However, there are times and situations when relaxation would not be so beneficial, such as massaging a baby with cerebral palsy. Therefore, you have to take into consideration each baby's individual needs, especially for babies with this condition. Some muscle groups may be tense and need relaxation while other areas may be loose and in need of stimulation. Infant massage not only stimulates muscles, it can stimulate other systems of the body as well. For example, it can help aid digestion, in turn, easing the symptoms of constipation. It also stimulates blood flow. While performing massage on someone you will feel the area you are working become warmer. Some babies have poor circulation, causing cold hands and feet. If this is the case for your baby, massaging for just 5 minutes will make a difference that you can notice. INTERACTION, also known as bonding, is a very complex process for both babies and care givers, and many factors can affect it. It is the development of understanding each other, of knowledge about who the other is and what exactly they need. Each parent and baby bond is unique and special. There is no one way that it happens, and no method that guarantees an easy or correct path. However, infant massage encourages a strong relationship between parent and baby. It allows a place and time to be together, where the focus is direct contact, providing an environment for healthy interaction to take place, free of distractions and every day worries. One of the major benefits of infant massage is learning to communicate together. Eye contact is highly encouraged throughout the

sessions, as is chatting, singing and humming. Infant massage instructors teach that once the parent is confident enough to massage without thinking about what move comes next or wonder if they are doing the stroke correctly - then comes a time of real communication. Watching and learning from each other, and getting to know the other.

**Conditions for Massage.** This is a guide for the best circumstances in which to massage your baby - remember though, you know your baby best, and none of this is set in stone! (Before beginning please be sure your hands are clean and dry.)

**Time** - it can be good to get baby into a routine where he/she knows when to expect the massage, whether it's first thing in the morning, after a bath, just before bedtime, or all 3. Remember, the choice is yours. You also don't have to do everything every time, if time is short, just do the bits that your baby likes best!

**Temperature** - make sure the room you are massaging in is warm and comfortable for you both. Babies can't always regulate their body temperature (especially premature infants). Remember, you will be removing their clothes, so keep the room temperature set at a comfortable level.

**Light** - it is best to have subdued light and be careful not to have either electric light or sunlight shining in your baby's face as this would be most uncomfortable for him or her.

**Oil** - it has been shown that babies prefer massage with oil. I and most (if not all) massage therapists recommend a vegetable or plant oil. Aromatherapy oils can be great as well, since they have the added gentle scents babies and adults love. Please do not use traditional baby oil, which is mineral based. Plant based oils are easy to absorb into the skin, and easily digested if your baby sucks his hand, thumb or foot with the massage oil attached! Mineral oils are not readily absorbed and, if not harmful, are certainly not good for you or baby.

**Diaper or no?** I always go for no diaper, if at all possible. If you are worried about leaks and messes you can always put a prefold (a kind of cloth diaper), playmat or towel under the diaper area. But think - if you were a baby being massaged, wouldn't you prefer to be able to kick your legs freely, and get fresh air..... well ..... you know where?)

**Dad** - you can massage baby too! Dads can easily feel shut out of their new baby's life, especially if mom is breastfeeding the baby. It may seem that there is no place for a dad in their child's life, especially in the earlier weeks and months when there really isn't an awful lot of playing and laughing going on; diaper changes only go "so far" and so on. Of course it isn't the case that there is no place for dad. Massage is one of several ways to get him involved. He then has the knowledge that he is doing something that will truly benefit the baby (and you, the mom too; it's nice to take a shower ALONE). There are other areas as well dad can help - bathing the baby for example, or if baby is bottle fed (or bottle and breastfed) he can take his turn with that. However, if and when dad is interested in doing the massage, let him! It is a wonderful sight to see.

**Final Thoughts:** For me, infant massage was an added benefit to my attachment parenting style. Not only did it help promote the bond I had/have with my son, it helped me understand him as well. He, as a baby, had reflux. Infant massage with Aromatherapy oil's changed his, and in turn, my life. I massaged Zachary 3 times a day for the first 8 months of his life. It promoted his well being, he in turned cried MUCH less and was a much happier baby. Now, at 22 months old, I massage 1-2 times a day, depending on his and my need to "re-connect." I am not trying to suggest that massaging your baby will ensure that they will be a happy, easy-going child; at least not all the time. But it may be able to ease some of the problems that you could encounter along the way. It has become something that I not only enjoy doing but also advocate to anyone who will listen.

## About the Author

Jennifer Sprague, co-owner of [High Top Baby Designs](http://www.hightopbabydesigns.com). She has several years of teaching experience, working with infants through adults and has a passion for helping children live happy, healthy and secure lives. Jennifer has been a nanny, daycare provider, teacher, and is currently studying to become a Doula and a Lactation Consultant. She enjoys spending time with her two wonderful children, Aubrey and Zachary. Jennifer is also an advocate for peaceful parenting everywhere she goes.

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