

Children and Massage

A Powerful Parental Ally

Shirley Vanderbilt

"Every child, no matter the age, should be massaged at bedtime on a regular basis." So says Tiffany Field, Ph.D., of the Touch Research Institute (TRI) in Miami, Fla. Field and her associates at TRI have worked diligently over the past decade proving the benefits of massage for children. But this is not a new concept.

Infant massage has long been a common practice in families of Eastern and African cultures. Many indigenous tribes use some form of bodywork to soothe, relax and heal their little ones, sometimes including scented oils and herbal remedies as part of the experience. With our modern technology and hurried lives, we

fail to thrive and even die without an adequate amount of physical contact. Adults, as well, can become depressed and ill if they are isolated from this most basic of human needs. Children who learn healthy views of touch and are provided with positive tactile experience by their caregivers are more likely to grow up to be adults with healthy self-esteem, a sense of appropriate boundaries and long-lasting intimate relationships.

TRI researcher Maria Hernandez-Reif, Ph.D., says she regularly gives massage to her own daughter. When asked if other parents should do the same, she says, "Absolutely, a daily massage at least. That's what the studies show. Regardless

*Everything you
do can be done
better from a
place of
relaxation.*

—~Stephen C. Paul



Massage can cultivate a sense of well-being and security for children.

frequently find ourselves lacking in quality family time and touching each other less. The ancient practice of massage can serve to reaffirm a close bond with our children, and to convey a comforting sense of security and trust.

Touch is the first sense to develop in humans. It is essential to our health and well-being. Babies have been known to

of whether it's an infant, a child with illness, a preschooler, pregnant women, or the elderly -- no matter who we studied we have found that massage benefits all age groups and individuals of different conditions."

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Kids Stress, Too

Massage is a wonderful stress-buster for children. "Oftentimes when we think about stress," Hernandez-Reif says, "we think it's just an adult condition, only adults have stress. But if you think about it, even young infants and children are prone to stress." A young child starting school who is unfamiliar with the area or children in the class will experience stress. Family illness or financial problems, divorce and even vacations can produce emotional strain. Hernandez-Reif notes that one of the consistent findings in studies of the benefits of massage therapy is a reduction in stress and stress hormone levels: "There is a relationship between stress and the immune system. If stress hormones are chronically elevated, the [hormone] cortisol will destroy the healthy immune cells that fight viruses and tumors and keep the immune system healthy. If you can reverse that, you not only reduce stress but also reduce stress hormones, allowing the immune system to bounce back and do its job, which is to heal the body and keep it healthy."

As for children's behavioral response to massage, she says, "They are happier and in a better mood. We have observed they appear more relaxed, calm and oftentimes fall asleep during massage." If it's the child's first massage, they may squirm a bit because they are not familiar with this type of touch. Due to the discomfort and pain of medical procedures inflicted on them, infants and especially premature babies may have developed a negative association with touch. Given this new, positive experience they relax and their bodies quiet down.

Infant Massage

One of the best ways to give your baby safe, positive messages about touch is to give her massage on a regular basis. Early infant massage may stimulate the developing nervous system and brain, and memory of that positive touch may then be permanently registered in the body cells. By improving circulation, respiration, digestion and elimination, massage promotes a sense of comfort in your baby and makes her less prone to colic. As the baby grows, the stroking of massage prepares the body for sitting, standing and walking by promoting

strength, motor coordination and self-confidence. Infant massage is becoming very popular with new parents and a number of resources are now available to get you started. In addition to books and videos, you can find certified infant massage therapy instructors in local private practice and at hospitals and clinics specializing in holistic medicine.

TRI's guideline of 15- to 20-minute sessions is a good rule to follow at home. Longer sessions can be overstimulating or even uncomfortable for a younger child with a short attention span.

Once massage is established as a family routine, it can benefit your child throughout his growing years. Preschoolers have shown better performance on tests of their intellectual and manual skills after a 15-minute massage. They also slept

better during naps, were less likely to be overactive, and had better behavior ratings.

For teens struggling with the growing pains of adolescence, massage helps to balance unstable hormones and can relieve anxiety by producing a state of relaxation. A supportive relationship with a massage therapist who gives them safe, unconditional touch can also increase their feelings of self-acceptance and self-confidence during those trying years.

Touch is essential to a child's development, sense of well-being, and good health. Kids reach out for touch as naturally as they do for food and water. A nightly massage can enhance the parent-child bond and ensure that touch is a positive, nurturing part of their human experience. And, as Field says, "They love it."



Giving your child a massage each day can help deepen the parent-child bond.

Massage for Your Teenager?

Bodywork Can Ease Adolescent Angst

While teens may be less likely than their parents to go to a massage therapist, there are plenty of reasons why this age group should be encouraged to give it a try. The benefits of massage are well documented, among them relief of muscle tension, lowered stress hormones, increased sense of relaxation, improved immune function, and even a heightened ability to concentrate, according to studies conducted by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine. But for teenagers, there's an additional payback.

The teenage body is in the midst of transformation -- exponential growth and development in a rapid period of time. On the physical side, teens may be at increased risk for aches, pains, and injury. Many teens strain their bodies with competitive sports, get erratic sleep, and consume a less-than-optimal diet. Massage can help muscles recover from overuse, and help balance the body and maintain that stability.

Perhaps even more crucial, teen massage can help improve body image and sleep patterns, and contribute to decreased depression, anxiety, and stress. This keeps a teen connected to her body, even as it morphs in confounding ways. "Many teens are self-conscious, and not happy with their bodies," says Eeris Kallil, massage therapist and shiatsu instructor at the Boulder College of Massage Therapy, in Colorado. "Massage can help teens stay grounded." Bodywork has also been reported to help mediate eating disorders, a growing concern among teens.

Another potential plus: A beneficial, therapeutic relationship can develop between bodyworkers and teenagers during the years when adolescents need adult confidantes, but keep parents at a distance. The practitioner can become a supportive, trusted adult in a teen's life. And the session itself, according to Kallil, can be a way to deal with all the physical and emotional turmoil of this tender age.



Massage eases teen depression and anxiety.

Massage for Seniors

Bodywork Improves Quality of Life

Almost 35 million Americans are age 65 or older, and about 2,000 more reach this age every day. As the U.S. demographic shifts to an older population, it's important to find ways of helping our elders maintain their health and vitality. Massage for seniors is gaining importance as an alternative therapy to increase quality of life, and many massage therapists are getting special training to better serve this growing population.

SENIORS' SPECIAL NEEDS

While similar in technique to other forms of massage, geriatric massage considers the special needs of the elderly. The specialty trained practitioner knows about positioning for greatest comfort and will often have the client rest in the same position for the entire massage. Mobility challenges

may dictate the massage be done in a bed or wheelchair. The therapist may also work both sides of the body at the same time to enhance body awareness, or only work hands and feet, if the client prefers. Sessions may be limited to 30 to 45 minutes, as older clients often do better with shorter, more frequent, massages.

The geriatric massage therapist is aware of health issues associated with aging and how to safely work with this type of client and with associated physicians. Consequently, the practitioner is able to individualize the massage service based on the client's health, mobility, and comfort level.

BENEFITS OF GERIATRIC MASSAGE

A recent study conducted at the Weaver's Tale Retreat Center in Oregon looked

at the effects of massage for elderly clients. The results of the two-year study showed that participants experienced a decrease in breathing rate of 50 percent and an improvement in range of motion, posture, body awareness, skin color, and muscle tone. Furthermore, it is well documented that caring touch benefits emotional well-being in seniors -- a population at greater risk of suffering from depression.

Massage therapy can add to the quality of a senior's life, both physically and emotionally. Consider booking a session for someone you love, and make a difference in their life.

*Those who bring
sunshine into the
lives of others,
cannot keep it
from themselves*

-~James M. Barrie

As you've seen, I've focused this newsletter on the various types and persons who can receive massage--everyone! And at just about every stage in life! I am certified in Prenatal, Geriatric, and teach Infant Massage to parents. Call and schedule and appointment today!

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Hope to see you there!

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