

The benefits of baby massage



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A scheme to improve young children's physical health and psychological development by introducing baby massage is described by members of a Sure Start team

Over many years a number of reports have linked health problems to low socio-economic status (Benzeval *et al* 1996, Townsend and Davidson 1988). Sure Start, a UK-wide initiative introduced following the publication of *Supporting Families* (Home Office 1998), is now having a positive impact upon the lives of deprived families.

Each Sure Start programme focuses on strategies to meet its targets for improving young children's health and development. Sure Start believes that the physical health of young children (up to four years) can be improved by supporting parents in caring for their children. One way in which young children's psychological development can be promoted, is by encouraging and supporting early bonding between parents and their children.

Sure Start – Creswell, Langwith/Whaley Thorns and Shirebrook, is a deprived community where young children's health is below the national average. The Sure Start team uses a variety of strategies to promote the health and development of young children – baby massage being one. Nursery nurses, health visitors and a community children's nurse are all involved in promoting baby massage by leading groups and working with families in the home. Several members of the team have undertaken an infant massage teacher training course.

Benefits of baby massage

Collins (1998) defines massage as the act of rubbing parts of the body to promote relaxation. From the literature examined (Field 1995, Heller 1997) and practice

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observations, baby massage appears to have a number of physical and psychological benefits for babies, not purely relaxation. Evidence shows that there are also benefits for mothers and fathers (Hart *et al* 2003) and an important aspect of baby massage is for parents to become skilled in touching their baby in a gentle, positive way, so that they become more sensitive to their baby's needs.

Physical health

Field (1995) found that massaged babies slept better than babies who had not received massage, and Scafidi *et al* (1986) demonstrated similar findings with premature babies. These researchers found that massaged babies slept more soundly and fell asleep more quickly. We have found that many mothers report that following

Parents have commented that baby massage has helped them to feel emotionally closer to their babies

a baby massage session their babies sleep particularly soundly and many babies have been observed falling asleep in the middle of a massage session.

Other studies focusing on premature babies and baby massage have highlighted that massage can have a dramatic impact upon weight gain (Field *et al* 1986). Field (2001), in a more recent article, points out that studies from different research units have produced similar findings on premature babies and increased weight gain. The impact of baby massage on weight gain may be difficult to determine as the growth of babies is influenced by many different factors, and, from our experiences within Sure Start, links with improved weight gain have been unreliable.

Another important area where massage seems to impact upon babies' physical health is infant colic, which is very common in young babies but usually resolves by the age of four to five months (Illingworth 1985). The symptoms of infant colic have been described as babies drawing their legs up in discomfort, passing wind (flatulence), having difficulty passing stools, and crying excessively, particularly during the evening (Illingworth 1985). From practice observations, when babies experience infant colic mothers find the symptoms very distressing as they often feel frustrated and unsure of how to help.

Touch Learn (2002) recommends baby massage as an effective, very gentle means of treating infant colic. Within Sure Start we have taught parents to undertake gentle abdominal baby massage, following careful instruction from qualified practitioners. Parents who reported infant colic as a problem found that abdominal massage successfully eased their babies' discomfort.

Interestingly, infant colic, although common in western cultures, is almost unheard of in some parts of the world. Heller (1997) reports that babies in some cultures, such as the Kung of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, are given baby massage in the very early days of life. Could baby massage be a preventive factor in infant colic? If so, perhaps baby massage could contribute to a reduction in infant colic within western cultures.

Psychological development

Baby massage not only has physical benefits, but can also improve psychological development. Some authors believe that baby massage can help with the developing relationship between babies and their parents – bonding (Field 1995, Heller 1997, Hart *et al* 2003). Mother/child bonding is a concept which has been explored for many decades (Bowlby 1951, 1969, 1973). Contemporary approaches to this concept tend to include fathers (Sutcliffe 1994). Hart *et al* (2003) found that baby massage strengthened the bond between parents and their babies. In our baby massage sessions, parents have commented that it has helped them to feel emotionally closer to their babies, more so than their other children at the same age. These parents did not have the opportunity to participate in baby massage when their other children were babies.

Heller (1997) believes that baby massage is an important means by which parents and babies communicate through touch. From our observations of parents massaging their babies, it does indeed seem to communicate caring, love and warmth through touch. Field (1995) found that massaged babies can be more sociable than babies who have not received massage. From practice experiences massaged babies do seem to be very sociable. As the sessions go by practitioners have observed babies interacting more positively with their parents, showing obvious social pleasure in their interactions. This may be due to parents' motivation to communicate with their babies, and massage provides a special medium for relaxed communication.

Cognitive development also seems to be enhanced through baby massage. Cigales *et al* (1997) demonstrated that lower limb massage could enhance simple learning. Babies of four months old were given eight minutes of massage, or play, or no stimulation, before a cognitive task. Babies who received massage showed better response recovery from the cognitive task than the babies in the other two groups. In another study, Field *et al* (1987) found that by massaging premature babies, they performed better on development tests. These researchers concluded that the babies' responsiveness had been heightened through massage.

Baby massage appears to have a number of psychological benefits, emotional as well as cognitive. It is our Sure Start's way of helping young children's psychological development, encouraging and supporting early bonding between parents and their children.

Benefits for parents

According to Field *et al* (1987) mothers who massaged their babies gained more pleasure from playing with them than mothers who did not massage their babies. Baby massage may have helped these mothers to feel closer to their babies. Other work by Field (2003) has demonstrated that baby massage can improve the mood of depressed mothers. Depressed mothers touching their babies through massage improved their babies' reactions towards them. Mothers, seeing their babies' positive reactions felt psychologically better, thus lowering their depression scores. In practice we have not worked specifically with depressed mothers to know the impact of baby massage in this area. However, our mothers do seem quite content and relaxed after massaging their babies.

Fathers too, can gain from the experience of baby massage. In sessions we have observed fathers handling their babies gently, and demonstrating warmth towards them. Our evidence would seem to correlate with that of Cullen *et al* (2000), who found that fathers who massaged their babies showed warmth towards them. These researchers felt that fathers massaging their babies strengthened the bond between fathers and their babies.

In practice we have found that only a small number of fathers participate in baby massage. This is similar to the findings of other centres (Mackereth 2003). Perhaps within Sure Start more work needs to be done to actively encourage fathers to attend. Fathers may be

reluctant to come along (Mackereth 2003) because baby massage may not be seen as the thing to do, particularly in a traditionally coal mining community.

Accessibility of classes and information about the benefits of baby massage may contribute towards improved uptake of sessions (Mackereth 2003). Fundamentally, the image of baby massage needs to become more accepted in the wider male culture before great strides can be achieved.

Developing parenting skills

Szyndler and Bell (1992) highlighted how parents find groups useful for learning and sharing information about different aspects of child rearing. Within our Sure Start team baby massage is undertaken on an individual basis within the home and in group sessions at the Sure Start centre.

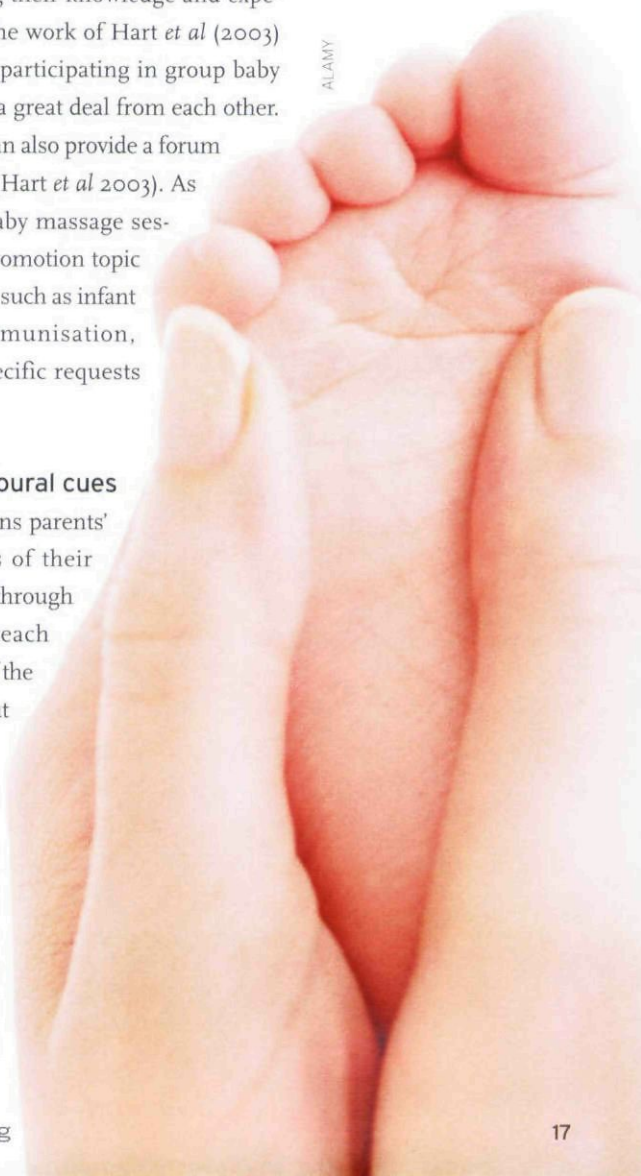
Group sessions certainly do seem to have the additional benefit of mothers and fathers learning from other parents by sharing their knowledge and experiences. This supports the work of Hart *et al* (2003) who found that parents participating in group baby massage sessions learnt a great deal from each other. Baby massage sessions can also provide a forum to discuss health issues (Hart *et al* 2003). As part of our Sure Start baby massage sessions a specific health promotion topic is approached each week, such as infant colic or childhood immunisation, depending upon the specific requests of parents.

Sensitivity to behavioural cues

From practice observations parents' sensitivity to the needs of their babies can be enhanced through baby massage. It can teach them to be more aware of the behavioural cues given out by their babies.

Babies are particularly sensitive to touch – it is the most highly developed sense at birth (Montague 1986). The overall development of babies who are touched and caressed a great

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deal has been found to be well advanced for their age (Montague 1986). Baby massage provides a sensitive medium for touch to occur, but for it to be successful parents must be aware of the behavioural cues given out by their babies during massage, and actively respond to these. Behavioural cues indicate the mood of babies, providing important information about whether to massage or not.

Murray and Andrews (2000) have identified positive behavioural cues or signals given out by babies; these include the baby's gaze, contented facial expressions, and calm body language. Negative behavioural cues are described as babies turning their heads away from their parents and becoming stiff within their parents' arms. From practice observations, positive behavioural cues exhibited during baby massage can include babies jiggling their arms and legs, or laying contentedly soaking up the massage experience. Negative behavioural cues we have observed include babies turning their heads away from their parents, or babies becoming distressed or restless during massage.

Positive and negative behavioural cues can indicate to parents whether their baby is enjoying the massage experience or not. If the baby is not enjoying it, then massage should cease. Baby massage should be a pleasurable experience. When members of our team

have observed certain behavioural cues such as those described, we point out the significance to parents. Parents may not always realise the significance of such behaviour and baby massage may help them to gain a better understanding of their baby's needs.

Our Sure Start team has found that baby massage can teach mothers and fathers a great deal about their babies. Parents positively touching their baby during massage can help them to see the world from their baby's perspective.

Conclusion

Baby massage seems to be beneficial within our local Sure Start area. Practitioners involved have found that baby massage can help babies' physical health and psychological development, as well as supporting parents in the care of their babies. Other colleagues are undergoing training so more parents can have the opportunity to participate.

Baby massage is a fairly new experience within British health care, although many cultures have undertaken the practice for centuries (Heller 1997). Baby massage could generate a different approach to child-rearing in this country; a more sensitive approach, with fathers feeling welcome to join in. As practitioners, we will watch with interest **PN**

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