

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

Life is just a chance to grow a soul.

-A. Powell Davies



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.

On the Rocks

Stone Massage Provides Tension Relief and Grounding

It's a practice as old as time, but one that has been recently rediscovered. LaStone Massage Therapy, generically known as hot stone massage, is the updated version of a technique employed by Native Americans, using gently warmed rocks to massage the body. The technique provides a deeply relaxing, healing, detoxifying, and, some say, spiritual experience.

Typically, the stones are smooth, black rounds of basalt in varying sizes heated in water to temperatures between 125 and 140 degrees. Warm stones encourage the exchange of blood and lymph and provide soothing heat for deep-tissue work. Cold stones are also used to aide with inflammation, moving blood out of the area, and balancing male/female energies. The alternating heat and cold of thermotherapy brings the entire body into the healing process, with a rapid exchange of blood and oxygen and alternating rise and fall of respiration rate as the body seeks homeostasis.

During treatment hot stones are placed on energy pathways. Some are covered with a towel and positioned to apply steady warmth and pressure along the spine and neck. Others are placed between fingers and toes and on the stomach and forehead -- key spots where energy flow can get blocked. Still others are used almost as an extension of the practitioner's hands to help go deeper into resistant muscle tissue. This requires less effort from the practitioner's own body and delivers healing warmth to the hands, benefitting the therapist, as well as the client.

In addition to the physical effects, hot stone massage is also considered a kind of energy work, calming and energizing the body but with an extra element thrown into the mix to make it more than just a sensory delight. The theory is that incorporating something from nature -- the stones -- adds a symbolic dimension to this therapy, creating a primal connection to the elements for a grounding experience.



Stone massage is both calming and energizing.

Easing Holiday Angst

Five Stress Busters for a Joyous Season

You enter the holiday season with the best of intentions -- looking forward to time spent with family and friends, decorating, shopping, baking. But as soon as you pile holiday activities on top of an already busy life, you're likely to find yourself relating more to Ebenezer Scrooge than Martha Stewart.

Consider these five suggestions to keep holiday stress at bay:

1. DETERMINE A SHOPPING BUDGET

For many, gift giving is an important part of the holidays, serving as a way to express love and appreciation for friends and family. But when the credit card bills arrive in January, you may discover you've extended your holiday stress well into the New Year. Plan your budget in

advance, determine what you can spend, and stick to the plan.

2. CREATE A TIME BUDGET

Many will make a shopping budget, but what about making a time budget? Before accepting every invitation this year, decide ahead how many parties you can and want to attend while maintaining your sanity. Make choices about your time commitments based on what you'd really like to do this year, rather than what you think you should do or what you've always done. Don't forget to leave time for yourself.

3. SET FOOD-INTAKE BOUNDARIES

You'll likely be tempted to eat in excess, and don't be too hard on yourself if you don't stick to your pre-holiday eating

standards. But do decide ahead of time just how much you'll deviate from your eating routine.

4. STICK TO YOUR EXERCISE REGIMEN

Regular exercise is a powerful stress buster. You'll feel better, sleep better, avoid weight gain, boost your immune system, and maintain a positive outlook about yourself. While it may seem like an easy time concession to make, don't give in to the idea. Stick to exercise, and you'll thank yourself for it.

5. TAKE TIME TO REST

Take time from your schedule to honor the cycles of the season. The holidays fall during winter solstice -- the shortest day of the year. Learn from nature, and get plenty of rest.

*There are two
means of refuge
from the
miseries of life:
music and cats.*

-Albert Schweitzer

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