

Massage & Body Maintenance

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Member, Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals

Children and Massage

A Powerful Combination

Shirley Vanderbilt

"Every child, no matter the age, should be massaged at bedtime on a regular basis." So says Tiffany Field, PhD, of the Touch Research Institute (TRI) in Miami, Florida. Field and her associates at TRI have worked diligently over the past two decades 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 frequently find ourselves lacking in quality family time and touching each

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, PhD, 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 of whether it's an infant, a child with

"Your feet will take you where your heart is!"

-Irish Proverb



Children who learn healthy views of touch develop better self-esteem.

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.

Essential Touch

Touch is the first sense to develop in humans. It is essential to our health and well-being. Babies have been known to fail to thrive and even die without an

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."

Massage for Stress

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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.

Massaging a Child

With infants, a gentle gliding stroke is applied to the body, but as the child grows older, the massage may become more sophisticated to include work on the feet, fingers, and toes, and use of more extensive types of strokes and techniques. "Teens are a little different," Hernandez-Reif says. "With young children, we can train the mother or parent to do massage for a daily dose. Teens, however, don't seem to like their parents giving them massage. They respond better to a massage therapist." 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.

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.

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.



Massage as a family routine can benefit your child throughout her growing years.

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 Eiris 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.

Navigating Online Health Information

Getting medical information on the Internet might be easy, but relying on it can be dangerous--rumors, misunderstandings, biased opinions, and outright lies await. Here are some tips for using the Internet effectively as part of your health care.

Getting Good Information

"Start at Web resources dedicated to providing only peer-reviewed medical information," says library science expert Sean Eads. "WebMD.com and Healthfinder.gov are two excellent resources where the articles are researched and written by professionals." Eads recommends avoiding websites like Wikipedia or Yahoo! Answers where anyone can provide unverified information.

Other options for information include

AskDrWiki.com, where articles can only be composed and edited by qualified medical professionals. For a more academic viewpoint of conditions, Eads suggests Searchmedica.com, which compiles medical journal articles, clinical trials, and other health magazines into its searchable database.

Trust the Professionals

Internet sources should not be used in place of health-care professionals, experts say, but rather as a supplemental tool to enable you to be a better advocate for yourself. Gather the knowledge you need to be informed and ask intelligent questions, but remember that consulting a website is not a substitute for a visit to a health-care professional.

One advantage that the Internet does have is its ability to foster connections

between people living with similar conditions. A September 2010 Pew Internet survey shows that 1 in 5 Internet users have sought out someone with the same medical condition they had. Building an online community can allow people to share experiences, and provide support across long distances and in situations where a condition is less common.

Find a Balance

Recognizing both the benefits and shortcomings of these websites is necessary to utilizing them most effectively. By using the voices of many to become more informed, you can be more involved when listening to the reliable voice of a qualified health professional.

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.

- Helen Keller

Happy Heart Month to all! February is American National Heart Month, 28 days dedicated to spreading awareness about heart and blood vessel diseases. American Heart Month also takes time to support programs and treatments that help solve the problems associated with these vital organs. Massage therapy reduces the heart rate, increases blood circulation, and lowers blood pressure.

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