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PARENTING

Baby Massage

How the art of loving touch improves a child's health, temperament and connection to mom

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Beautiful, precious, what a joy. This is how mothers, even those who have experienced the most difficult pregnancy and labor, respond to their new babies. How is it that newborn babies so successfully bring out the most primal and basic instinct of nurturing from us? The inclination to protect, love, nurture and embrace the newborn close to the heart are fundamental instincts common to most species, including humans. They are built into the bodies and minds of the adults to further the uninterrupted continuation of the cosmic cycle of life. Giving birth is one form of participation in the cosmic cycle of creativity--nurturing the newborn is yet another form.

In the relationship between a newborn baby and its mother, nurture can be expressed in many different ways. Striving for baby's optimum good health is one. So is providing balanced nutrition and a safe and secure living environment. The time-tested daily art of baby massage is yet another route to a healthy and happy child.

The holistic practice of massage is based on an essential belief that good physical health and a relaxed, peaceful, happy state of mind are interconnected and that this positive connection constitutes the natural state of being. Sickness or an agitated mind are deviations from the natural state. Traditional Indian medicine, ayurveda, recommends a daily massage followed by a bath as an important aid for maintaining the natural good health and well-being of body and mind. By starting her baby on the daily ritual of massage and bath, a mother makes a long-term investment into her child's future health and wellness.

Mothers need not be board-certified massage therapists to perform this simple daily ritual. More than professional technique, babies need and thrive on a touch that conveys tenderness, love, caring, warmth and security. In the mother-and-child relationship, which is ruled more by love than logic, massage is all about connecting with the baby. Not only the biological mother, but anyone who can touch the baby with these messages is fit to give the massage. The goal is to make the baby feel wanted and loved.

Best time: If not interfered with, all babies have a natural rhythm of waking up for nursing and going back to sleep when satisfied. Most babies steadfastly follow their internal rhythm. Midmorning (10:00 to 11:00 am) is often a good time for a massage session, but each mother and baby is a unique pair, so they need to find the time that suits them best and is in harmony with the rest of the household. Soon after waking up, the baby can be nursed, and after about fifteen to twenty minutes massage can be started. Massage should not be given to a baby immediately after his meal. Except when babies

have a fever or any other underlying infection (with or without fever) mothers can start infant massage on the eleventh day after birth. Even premature babies can receive massage when they come home from the hospital.

Environment: Depending on the time chosen for massage, either a calming or a stimulating environment can be created. Babies receiving massage late in the evening would like a quiet, dimly lit room for massage, such that they can relax and fall asleep for the night. Babies receiving massage in the midmorning or daytime would like to have a bright and cheerful environment that promotes alertness. In warm climates, babies can receive massage outdoors and reap the health-promoting benefits of sunlight and fresh air. But in cold climates it is better to do massage indoors and to keep the room warm, at 85 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Exposing the baby to cold drafts should be avoided. If necessary, a warm air blower could be used because body temperature and blood pressure register a mild dip during massage, which can make babies quite cold and uncomfortable. Prior to beginning massage, every necessary item like oil, towels, diapers, outfits, etc. should be gathered and placed within reach. Once massage has begun, it is not in the best interest of the baby if a mother is running around procuring things needed for the session. At no time should the baby be left unattended.

Choosing an oil: Either cold-pressed almond or olive oil with a few fresh basil leaves crushed into it would be a good choice. Besides being considered sacred in Hindu mythology, basil is known to have antibacterial, antifungal and antiviral activity and is believed to enhance the immune system. However, these oils can also be used without basil leaves. Avoid old and

rancid oils.

Creating a soundscape: Babies love their mother's voices. It is good for the mother to sing or even simply talk to the baby in a calm, soothing voice while giving massage. Mother's voice helps her baby over the initial trauma of undressing, lying down on the massage mat and feeling oil on its skin. Babies soon make efforts to smile back, cooing and gurgling in response, thereby starting their first lessons in socialization.

Even though babies don't have a verbal vocabulary, they are born with sensibilities about sounds that are soft and pleasing, inducing calm, and the other sounds that induce fear, shock, agitation and insecurity. It is important, therefore, to cut out negative sounds (like noise from televisions, blaring radios and other loud mechanical noises from the household and neighborhood), and to create sounds that have a calming and positive impact on the babies. Simple repetitive chantings of names of any Deity, simple bhajanas (religious melodies) and simple baby rhymes are suitable for the occasion. Repetitive chantings of the names of Deities induce a meditative mind-set in adults, and there are no reasons to believe that they wouldn't do the same for the minds of newborn babies.

Ready, set, go: Having created a suitable environment, mothers can now undress the baby fully (this is a strong reason for keeping the room warm). Exposure of the full body to the air and light has its own healing effects, and it's believed that this practice helps in preventing germs from thriving in the moist folds of babies' skin.

It is easy to lay the baby on a massage mat, but given the freedom to choose, the baby would prefer its mother's lap. Once a baby is placed snugly on mother's lap it is likely to stop fussing and crying. Now mother can rub a small amount of oil between her palms (to bring the oil to body temperature) and spread it evenly over the baby, beginning with the head and moving on to the face, ear lobes, neck, shoulders, middle back, lower back, buttocks, thighs, legs, feet and toes, chest, armpits, belly, groin area, hands, fingers and nails. Then, with very gentle and soft hands, the oil should be rubbed into the skin using long strokes, circular strokes and gentle patting. It is ideal to spend 20 minutes on the front of the body and another 20 on the back. This will allow for complete absorption of the oil into the skin.

Strong pressure, pinching, kneading or pulling is never advised. The soft spot on the skull should be touched with the utmost gentleness. It is also important that the mother not grow long, sharp nails that could scratch the tender skin of the baby. She should remove her finger rings as well and always scrub her hands thoroughly before massage.

After all the oil has been absorbed into the skin, a series of stretching exercises can be done, but always without use of any force or pressure [see sidebar].

Then the bath: All babies enjoy a daily bath after massage. Running tap water, a small metal, wood or plastic tub, or a large shallow sink all serve well for a baby bath. Water temperature should be checked in the beginning and also from time to time during the bath.

The baby should be held firmly at all times with its head kept above water. Babies do not need shampoos, cosmetics, soaps or powders, especially not those with synthetic chemicals, perfumes, colors and preservatives. Plain warm water is the best cleansing agent for babies. The baby should be rinsed well with special attention to skin folds, the back of the ears, neck, armpits, groin area and the space between toes and fingers. All these areas are potential sites for germs and daily cleaning with warm water is the best prophylactic against infection. Using clean fingers and warm water, the inside of the mouth, gums, cheeks and tongue should be wiped every day. This practice is known to prevent a white coating of yeast on babies' tongues.

It is okay to massage and bathe a baby before the cord falls off, as long as the cord is not infected. Immediately after the bath, the baby should be wrapped from head to toe (exposing the face) in a clean, fresh towel and should be patted dry. The cord should be patted dry with special attention. Ears, nose and eyes should be cleaned gently and wiped dry. Now the baby is ready to be diapered, dressed according to climate and nursed for comfort.

A family affair: It is hard to ignore the fact that older siblings and other children think of new babies as living, breathing toys. A massage session that the new baby thoroughly enjoys is an irresistible piece of entertainment for older kids. When my nephew Kartik was born in my childhood home in Jamshedpur, Bihar (India), there were ten children in the neighborhood ranging in age from three to eleven years. They were close friends of my other nephew, 11-year-old Chandrashekhar, who was living with us. These children made

it a point to check with my mother every day about when Kartik would get his massage, and they would show up at our house around that time. Each one of them would compete with the others about who would get to sit closest to the baby. They would join my mother in singing and chanting or talking to Kartik. As Kartik would begin to relax, coo, giggle and smile, they would all do the same back, creating a fun-filled, joyous and occasionally riotous scene.

These massage sessions had a positive impact on a three-year-old boy who was very fussy about baths. After seeing how happy baby Kartik was during his massage, he told his mother he'd gladly take a bath every day if he got a massage just like Kartik's. His mom, a city-bred woman with three kids, showed up for a few massage sessions to see what my mother did. A few days later, she came back with a proud smile on her face and stories about her three-year-old who had discovered the joys of daily massage, exercise and bath. He looked forward to the daily ritual with great anticipation. This young mother was delighted to add that she did not have to sing for her boy, he had picked up a few simple chants and bhajanas that my mother sang during Kartik's massage session, so he sang them himself every day during his massage and bath.

By setting aside time each day for massage, mothers can achieve the main purpose of infant massage, which is flowing into the natural body rhythm of the baby. Such a session successfully creates a loving, warm, safe, secure and comfortable environment for relaxation, stimulation and exercise for the baby. Massage is known to help premature and colicky infants and other babies with special physical and

mental needs. And for all babies, it is well-known that massage promotes and enhances weight gain, good skin texture and tone, strong bones, muscles and joints, sharp reflexes, healthy circulation, good digestion, alertness and motor skills.

Massage sessions provide a mother with a unique opportunity to harmonize herself with her baby. By setting aside time for a daily massage, not only does a mother ensure relaxation and joy for her baby today, but she paves the way for a loving, committed friendly and nurturing relationship between mother and child and a healthy tomorrow for the adult her child will become. How's that for a touching gift?

How to Exercise a Baby After the Day's Massage

After all the oil has been absorbed into the skin, this series of stretching exercises can be done, but always without use of any force or pressure. Exercises can be started 11 days after birth. Five to ten repetitions of each are quite sufficient and will not be met with any protest from babies. All exercises are with the baby on its back. These are done after the baby has been massaged, but before the bath.

Stretching

- * With the baby lying down on its back, gently stretch first its hands, then its feet downward (i.e. away from the head)
- * Stretch the hands up, above the head.
- * Stretch the hands sideways, out from the shoulder such that hands and shoulder come in a straight line.

Lifting

- * Lift baby's hands up towards you with a gentle pull on head and shoulders, meaning, just slightly lifting the baby's head up.
- * Lift each leg up separately.
- * Lift both legs up together.
- * Lift left leg, touching the foot to the raised right hand, then lift the right leg touching the foot to the raised left hand.

Bending

- * Bend one leg and push the knees close to the chest, then do the same with the other leg.
- * Bend both legs and push both knees close to the chest.

Crossing

- * Cross baby's right leg over the left, then cross the left leg over the right.
- * Cross both hands over baby's chest. After the session of crossing legs and hands, uncrossing should be done gently.

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They have one son.