

INFANT MASSAGE

Vimala McClure first recognized the value of massage for babies when she was working in an orphanage in India in the early 1970s. Babies with few other advantages in this world were lulled into sleep each night with a massage before bedtime.

A young woman with no children of her own at the time, McClure tucked what she saw away for future reference. Later, as a new mother back in the United States with a fussy baby on her hands, she drew on what she learned in India, learned a few other techniques from some massage therapist friends, tried it out on her son, resolved his colic ... and launched a movement. McClure, now retired and living in Boulder, Colorado, is hailed as the mother of infant massage in the United States.

“I turned my attention to the animal kingdom, how mammals touch their young, and what it means,” McClure says. “Most mammals lick and touch their babies as soon as they’re born. A lot of people think that’s for cleaning

them, but it’s not. It’s getting their gastrointestinal functions going, and other things we don’t think much about. The rubbing of massage is just like the licking that goes on with, say, a mother cat and her kittens. It stimulates the organs inside and helps them function the way they’re supposed to.”

Today, techniques vary, but no one disputes the extraordinary benefits for these tiniest of massage recipients, and many therapists are drawn to the field. Some specialize in therapeutic massage for medically at-risk infants and children, often performed in hospitals. Some specialize in massage for pregnant women, recognizing that babies benefit even while in the womb when their mothers are massaged. And many specialize in teaching new mothers and fathers the techniques they need to massage their own infants.

For massage therapists interested in moving their practices in this direction, following are some things to consider.

1. SPECIALIZED TRAINING REQUIRED

“Babies are very different from your adult clients,” says Tina Allen, founder of Liddle Kidz Foundation, an organization based in Vancouver, Washington, that trains therapists in infant massage and therapeutic touch techniques for babies and children. “Basic training as a massage therapist simply isn’t enough to work with infants and children.”

A number of organizations promote infant and child massage, including Liddle Kidz (liddlekidz.com), the International Association of Infant Massage (iaim.net), the International Loving Touch Foundation

(lovingtouch.com), the American Pregnancy Massage Association (Americanpregnancymassage.org), MotherMassage (mothermassage.net), and Baby’s First Massage (babysfirstmassage.com) to name a few. Contact one or more of these organizations to look into certification.

Hands-on training—not just online course work—is vital, say practitioners. “This is not something to be taken lightly,” says Diana B. Moore, director of the International Loving Touch Foundation in Portland, Oregon.

2. LEARN TO SPEAK “BABY”

Whether teaching parents how to massage their babies or actually working on the infants yourself, it’s imperative to understand their nonverbal cues. Eye-to-eye contact, smiling, reaching toward the caregiver, cooing, and babbling—these are all signs that a baby is receptive to massage. “When you see that, that’s when you see the magic happen between mom and baby, versus a baby who is not ready, who might turn away, not make eye contact, arching their back, crying,” Moore says. These are all potent disengagement cues. Trying to massage a crying baby is an unpleasant experience.”

Teresa Kirkpatrick Ramsey, founder of Baby’s First Massage in Dayton, Ohio, calls the communication between baby and massage giver *listening touch*. “Our hands are like big ears,” she says. “When we touch, we’re really feeling for the texture of the baby’s skin, the temperature. We’re observing with our eyes as we’re feeling for receptivity to





our touch. By being fully present in our hands, it creates an unspoken nurturing, a willingness to set our own stuff aside.”

3. REMEMBER WHO YOUR CLIENT IS

Unless you're providing therapeutic massage to medically at-risk babies, your client is the baby's caregiver. And new moms are typically pretty stressed out to begin with. So don't add to their stress by making this too difficult or too demanding.

“We need to temper our enthusiasm with a sense of responsibility and respect for what the family needs,” Ramsey says. “And my experience with new families is that they have short attention spans and a lot on their minds, so we can only give them a little bit,” she says.

“Be in their corner,” advises Marybetts Sinclair, Corvallis, Oregon, massage therapist, instructor, and author of *Pediatric Massage Therapy* (Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2004). “They don't need one more expert telling them what to do. Find out what their concerns are. They're the ones staying up at night, making huge sacrifices to support their children. You don't just give those parents a lot of things to do and then say, ‘You should spend 20 minutes every day massaging your baby.’ If they have other kids, they may not have that much time. But find out what's appropriate for them.”

4. BE FLEXIBLE

Infants operate on their own time clocks, and theirs may not always jibe with yours. “They're unlike other clients who will willingly disrobe and hop onto a table for their session,” Allen says. “Infants may be more interested in eating or sleeping or having their diaper changed at the time of their massage session. So it's best to have some

creative ideas up your sleeve to make the session educational and fun for all, even when the baby is crying,” she says.

“There's generally one baby in every class that it's just not their time of day,” Sinclair advises. “But we just jolly them along. That's part of their charm, too.”

5. INFANT MASSAGE ISN'T NECESSARILY LUCRATIVE

Sinclair is blunt: “There's not much money in working with children.” She advises not trying to build an entire practice around infant massage unless you're in a major metropolitan area that can support such specialization.

But there are positives. Infant massage—especially leading classes in which you just use a doll—isn't nearly as physically taxing as other forms of massage. And if you tap into the right markets, you can grow your practice quickly. “As an infant massage teacher, you can teach private sessions or group classes,” Allen says. “And group classes can be made up of any number of families. This means more money coming in for the same one-hour class.”

6. BE AWARE OF POTENTIAL LIABILITIES

An infant massage teacher can ply his or her trade in any number of settings: private homes, hospitals, early education centers, community events, health-care clinics. “Really, the number of places

you can teach are endless,” Allen says. “Anywhere you can carry your teaching doll can become your classroom.”

That's the good news. But having such a multi-situated practice does have insurance ramifications, and you may need to add each of the settings in which you practice to your liability policy, Allen warns.

Also, as someone who has authorized contact with young children, you're required by law to report any instances of suspected child abuse. Failure to do so could lead to criminal charges. “There are liability issues there, too,” Moore says, “so you should be informed.”

7. BE SMART ABOUT MARKETING

The best marketing is always word of mouth, but don't let that stop you from doing something online. “You must create an Internet presence,” Allen says. “Thirty-year-old marketing techniques won't help you reach today's young families. At 2:00 a.m., when the baby finally falls asleep, today's parent is going to be on the Internet looking for the best way to help them fall asleep tomorrow night. Your information has to be online and easy to find in order to be the answer for them.”

Ditto for targeted advertising. Figure out where the young families are and go there. “Parent groups are your number one market,” Sinclair says. “Childbirth prep classes. Networking with midwives. Going to the ob-gyns where you live. I've



done demonstrations for teen parent groups. The county health department often has support groups.”

8. BE HEALTH-CONSCIOUS

Babies are a particularly vulnerable population. Of course basic hygiene measures such as hand washing are important. But even a case of sniffles requires extra caution when working with infants. “Sometimes, when we’re self-employed, our income depends on us showing up for work,” Ramsey acknowledges. “Sometimes we do things whether we’re really in good shape physically or not. It’s sad, but some of us feel it’s a necessity. But around babies, we have to put their safety and well-being first.”

9. BE PREPARED


“You can’t turn your back even for a moment with these little guys,” warns Elaine Stillerman, developer of MotherMassage professional training program, based in Brooklyn, New York. “They’ll roll and fall. So you need to have all your supplies handy around you.”

Sinclair has a list of supplies she keeps on hand, and only part of them are actually used in the massage. Top of the list: toys, stuffed animals, and interesting things for little hands to hold, along with some good children’s music. And floor pads covered with quilts make a dandy place for a massage and there’s no chance of the baby rolling off.

10. CONSIDER THE REWARDS

“I’m convinced,” Stillerman says, “that if every pregnant woman were massaged regularly, we wouldn’t have any more war. Their babies are calmer, and with a calm baby, a new mother feels more confident about being able to manage her child. This impacts their neurological development. Babies who are massaged become more loving people. Their IQ is increased, their motor skills are increased, they’re happier. It’s just a win-win situation.”

Indeed, there’s evidence that massage improves a baby’s gastrointestinal functioning, improves circulation, relieves teething discomfort, stimulates weight gain, and sparks brain development.

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