

## *Infant Massage for Children with Disabilities/Special Needs*

Anita Epple



Anita Epple, Infant Massage Teacher-Trainer and Author, first became interested in baby massage shortly after the birth of her daughter in the late 90s and, from first-hand experience she quickly became aware of its benefits. Since then Anita has been an enthusiastic and

passionate ambassador for baby massage. She teaches parents and professionals in the UK and abroad, and she runs the exemplary positive touch training company Touch-Learn International Limited. Anita has written several published articles and books on infant massage, and has made an appearance on television. Touch-Learn has been training health professionals and parenting practitioners\* in the UK for over eight years and is accredited by the Guild of Infant and Child Massage, IGPP and IPTI.

\* Parenting practitioners is a generic term for professionals working in family centres and Sure Start Centres across the UK, such as family support workers, outreach workers etc.

### **Summary**

Baby Massage is a wonderful way for parents to use positive touch. This gives the opportunity for special time together; incorporating not only the massage but also therapeutic hugs and holds, fun with nursery rhymes and music. Baby massage is also a fantastic way for parents to learn how their baby communicates with them, enabling parents to understand what their baby wants and comfort them with loving touch.

*Giving your baby a regular massage shows her she is loved and respected and helps to secure a lasting relationship between you both. It is a gift for life!*

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From the moment they are born, babies actively seek interaction with others and, through play and just being around people in everyday life, their unique little personalities become increasingly apparent to their parents, who can then tune into their infants likes and dislikes, strengths and sensitivities.

Loving touch from a parent plays an enormous part in establishing physical and emotional connections with an infant and, during the last decade, there has been a huge upsurge in professionals working with parents and infants to offer infant massage to parents who are seeking to learn more about the wonderful benefits.

Bernard Brazelton, child psychologist, believes that touch is central to the development of the bonding relationship between parent and child. Infant massage is a form of positive touch and an extremely important form of communication between parent and baby, therefore aiding the attachment and bonding process. A recent systematic review (Underdown et al, 2006) found that infant massage has beneficial effects in terms of reducing stress hormones (Cortisol), promoting sleep and promoting positive interactions especially where mothers have been diagnosed with postnatal illness. In addition, Suzanne Zeedyk (2007) states that regular positive touch and infant massage can help with cognitive and brain development.

These significant benefits can be experienced not only by a healthy full-term baby, but by babies with some form of special need or disability.

Many Portage service professionals and health professionals, working with parents whose infant has a special need, undertake infant massage teacher training, because they recognise how valuable this



Back massage is extremely soothing



Baby massage is so versatile it can be done almost anywhere!

service can be. When infant massage is taught sensitively and professionally to parents, it offers them a non-stigmatising, inclusive, and empowering environment in which to learn a new skill. This will enable them to communicate with their infant, understand their body and feel positive that what they are doing is not only safe, but will help their baby. It is paramount that a non-directive teaching style is adopted ensuring that the teacher is hugely respectful of the parent and the infant, so that the experience is a positive one for all.

Commonly, infant massage is taught in a group setting, so that parents can not only learn the skill, but form friendships and network with each other. It is particularly useful for those parents who feel isolated or for mothers suffering from depression. However, it is recognised that working with groups of Portage parents may prove difficult due to the need for numerous hospital/clinic appointments and often parents may not be able to attend a regular course. However, this does not preclude them from attending a one-to-one course with a teacher so that the programme can be tailored to their individual needs – it just takes a little thought.

Each condition will be different and will require the teacher to consider adaptations to the standard strokes and positioning to accommodate specific medical needs. For instance a baby with a gastrostomy (Tipping, 2009) or an umbilical hernia (Epple, 2009) may find it difficult to lie in the prone position for a back massage, but suitable adaptations can be made to perform the back strokes without causing discomfort.

Lots of infants with special needs (such as Cerebral Palsy) have sensory issues and it is important when

teaching parents to massage their infant that the strokes should be quite firm as otherwise they may tickle and over-stimulate the baby. This can start with a very few strokes each session, building baby's tolerance, until the point when they are happy to receive a full massage. Regular massage can strengthen the immune system and studies show that some premature infants who receive positive touch from their parents in hospital show greater physical and neurological improvement over those who are not massaged and generally gain weight more rapidly, reducing their stay in a special care unit (Scafadi, 1990).

Infant massage can also help those families whose babies are terminally ill. This can improve the quality of the remainder of everyday life for the child and enable the parents to remain in touch with their child and communicate their loving feelings (Hubbard, 2002). Infant massage can be used with infants with many disabilities, however the parent is always asked to check with the baby's physicians to ensure that there are no contraindications arising from a particular condition with regards to massage (Epple, 2009).

As a teacher and trainer of infant massage to health professionals I am convinced that as well as the above, massage can offer so much more for an infant with a disability and their family, giving increased confidence and providing respite from constant trips to appointments. This is supported by Portage Co-ordinator Janet Robinson (Robinson, 2008) who wrote:

**For one mum whose son was very disabled it made such a huge difference she wrote on her evaluation: "I feel J loves it and it makes me feel very close to him." The massage had such an impact that J was meeting his Portage targets through his massage sessions!**

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