
Infant Massage for Babies with Sensory Impairments

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Infant massage is a technique that can yield great benefit to all babies and their parents, but is especially appropriate for infants with sensory impairments because of the fundamental role the sense of touch may play in this population.

- **The sense of touch may be the most reliable avenue to help connect the baby to their parent(s).** Depending on the degree of vision and hearing, touch may be the main way the baby senses the world, so infant massage can become *an important bonding experience*. In this scenario, the baby can feel the comforting touch of mom or dad, and the parent can feel the baby's body reacting and responding to his or her touch.
- **Infant massage strokes are given slowly and rhythmically.** These two characteristics are very important for a baby with sensory impairments. *Slow strokes can give enough time* for the baby to perceive and respond to parental touch. *Rhythmic strokes can provide a sense of comfort and predictability* that allows the child to relax.
- **Infant massage may provide a positive tactile experience for the baby.** Infant massage is given through deep touch, which can be very comforting. Having a positive tactile experience may encourage the baby to use the sense of touch to explore their surrounding environment.
- **Infant massage may provide information to the baby about their body.** The regular application of soothing touch *may help the child create a mental image of their whole body and increase their self-awareness*. This may improve the baby's ability to play with their own body and with the world around them, for example by reaching for their feet, their caregiver or any object they may find attractive.

Despite the great benefits indicated, infant massage may not be comforting for the baby at the beginning. Some of the reasons the baby may be resistant are: 1) painful past medical experiences, so that touch may be alarming to the infant, 2) neurological issues, so the baby may be overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience, and/or 3) insufficient readiness for the close interaction that infant massage provides--sometimes family members, for a variety of reasons, may not interact physically with a child who has sensory impairments as much as they might with a baby with no disabilities.

Some strategies that may help with these issues are:

- **Be sensitive to the baby.** Though infant massage is usually a very positive experience, it doesn't mean that it will be pleasurable for your child at the beginning.
- While massaging, **be focused on the child** and respond to their cues. Allow the child to dictate readiness.
- Start with the parts of the body where they accept the massage** and slowly expand from there. This process may take a while.
- Anticipate the massage by providing clear cues:** 1) Touching the baby's body in a way that says "I am going to massage you now," 2) providing olfactory cues by bringing your hands with oil close to their nose, and 3) by talking to them about what you are going to do.
- Warm up your hands** with the oil before touching and massaging the baby. Cold hands can startle.
- Be in a comfortable position** when massaging the baby so it is a relaxing experience for both of you.
- Massage regularly and periodically,** at a time of the day when the child is calm and alert, perhaps at the same time everyday so the baby can learn to anticipate the activity.

Before ending, I would like to share a story about a student I worked with many years ago. I will call him Miguel. Miguel was totally blind from birth – his eyes did not develop. He also had cerebral palsy and did not move much. Miguel's mother felt helpless because she worried that her son was not responding to her care. Miguel was her first child and she was a single parent. So I shared with Miguel's mother the idea of massaging the baby, and she agreed. At that time, infant massage was not a term or technique that was widely used. My thinking behind this was:

- Through the massage, Miguel and his mother would physically and emotionally bond. Her son would feel the gentle and warm moving touch of his mother's hands. And his mother would feel the warm, soft, little body of her son.
- Miguel would slowly start responding to his mother's consistent and periodic touch, and his responses would allow the mother an opportunity to respond to her son.
- Through the contact with his mother's hands, Miguel would become more aware of his body and start moving his body more.
- The mother would feel that she was doing something positive with her son, and she could start building self-confidence as a mother, e.g., "I am a good mother," "I care for my child and I can communicate this to him," "Now I know what to do."
- Their relationship was not going to be all about stress, anxiety, and concern, but it could also be relaxing and pleasurable.

This story had a happy ending. Miguel started responding to his mother with more movement, smiles, and sounds. From that point on, life grew richer for Miguel and his mother.

Resource:

Miles, B. (2002). Touch. In L. Alsop (Ed.), *Understanding Deafblindness: Issues, Perspectives, and Strategies* (pp. 217-243). Logan, UT: SKI-HI Institute. In this chapter Barbara Miles elaborates on the benefits of infant massage. She describes procedures you may take in preparation to the massage and during the massage, and provides specific descriptions, through text and pictures, on how to massage each part of the baby's body.