

Baby Massage: A report from Japan

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I am an aromatherapist, reflexologist and baby massage instructor who originally trained in the UK. I have been teaching a course on baby massage at Shiramizu Maternity Clinic in Japan since January 2003. This course is intended for two to nine-month-old babies who were born at this clinic along with their parents. It comprises of a one hour-long session, four times a month. In this report I plan to outline my work and discuss the benefits gained by both parents and their babies.

THE EVOLUTION OF BABY MASSAGE

Baby massage is quite a new concept to the Japanese people. When I started to introduce baby massage four years ago, it was an unheard-of practice, even amongst midwives. More recently however, baby massage is becoming an increasingly familiar concept to the Japanese since the formation of some associations aimed at spreading this practice (Baby Massage Society, www.babymassage.jp; Japan Association of Infant Massage, www.iaim.jp) and some benefits of baby massage were given media attention.

In India and some African countries, traditionally, babies are massaged daily. This custom was introduced to Western countries as a technique to strengthen the physical and emotional bond between babies and parents, especially for those who were busy and did not have much time to spend with their babies. Now this practice is expanding into many countries of the world.

The key benefit of this massage is thus the strengthening of bonds between babies and parents. With loving touch resulting in relaxed and emotionally stable babies, it is also beneficial in promoting good sleep, activating the metabolic activities of the skin, aiding digestion, strengthening the immune system, maintaining good balance and posture as well as helping mothers to recover from post-natal syndrome.

THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF BABY MASSAGE

In this report I plan to explain some of the main principles of baby massage such as preparation and timing. Then I will give some detail of the full body massage routine designed by Peter Walker, a physical therapist who works with babies and children in the UK and taught during the developmental baby massage teacher training course (www.thebabyswebsite.com/training.htm). However the most important point to emphasize is that the massage should never be performed against the baby's will. If babies cry or do not respond well to massage during the session, parents are asked to stop the massage immediately and hug or feed their babies, as necessary. It is of the utmost importance that parents massage their babies *only* when the baby is completely comfortable. They should not be too hungry, too full or too tired.

Babies are undressed and massaged with fixed oil, taking about 20 minutes for a full body massage. The routine includes the legs, hips, belly, shoulder and arms, and back. I find that most babies prefer to begin with their legs and then to continue upwards to the rest of their body. Massaging the legs will help to promote the development of coordination, strengthen the lower back and maintain the flexibility of the knees and ankles. Massaging the hips will help babies to maintain the flexibility of the joints; very important for good posture as the hip joints support the spine and pelvis. Massaging the belly is very relaxing and can help to relieve stress, birth trauma and constipation. Massaging the shoulders and arms will ensure full flexibility of the shoulder girdle and help with muscle suppleness of the arms. Massaging the back will help with spinal strength and flexibility. The back is massaged with the baby in a prone position. For some young babies who are not used to this position, it is quite hard to maintain the posture at first. However, the back muscles will begin to strengthen when they lie on their tummy and they will gradually learn to lift their heads before long.

After the massage, feeding is necessary. Many post-massage babies fall asleep while feeding. However not all babies appear to initially respond well to baby massage. Usually it takes three to four sessions before babies can begin to enjoy full body massage. I provide handouts of massage sequences and key points and ask parents to massage their babies regularly; everyday if possible. I also introduce some other useful techniques in relieving constipation or congested nostrils as well as an oil-free relaxing massage for feet, hands and head.

THE MESSAGE MEDIUM AND SAFETY

The massage oil I use is an essential oil-free blend of 75% organic *Helianthus annuus* (sunflower seed) oil and 25% *Calendula officinalis* (calendula) macerated oil. I always conduct a skin test before using this mixture. A little oil is rubbed into a small area of skin on the baby's calf or arm to test for an allergic or irritant reaction. In my experience so far, none of the babies have shown any skin reactions to this oil. Other vegetable oils that might be suitable for baby massage include *Olea europaea* (olive), *Prunus*

amygdalis var. *dulcis* (sweet almond) or *Simmondsia sinensis* (jojoba). I always recommend using organic fixed oils processed by cold pressing and not refined.

If the baby has a skin condition, depending on its severity, the affected area should usually be avoided. If the condition is severe or inflamed, massage with fixed oils may further irritate the skin. In that case, I ask parents to consult the doctor at the clinic. Generally, I find that regular massage with oil has added skin health benefits; it keeps the skin moist and smooth, cleanses the pores of dead cells and gives it a healthy glow. There are many cases where the baby's skin condition (for example dry skin or nappy rash) has improved or disappeared following massage.

THE BABY MASSAGE CLASS

At Shiramizu Maternity Clinic, usually two to four families get together in a room at the clinic on Sunday afternoons and enjoy the massage in a relaxing ambience. In the first session, many babies begin to cry in the middle of the session. This is perhaps due to the fact that both babies and parents are not yet used to the massage itself. However, after a few sessions, babies become more relaxed and begin to enjoy the massage. Slow massage with relaxed hands whilst breathing deeply tends to make babies more relaxed.

Many fathers are hesitant to massage their babies. They often prefer to watch at first, probably because they are less familiar with touching their baby. By the last session, most fathers have grown to enjoy performing the massage. This could be seen as the start of an increase in the daily participation in childcare responsibilities as a father. The class may also function as a good opportunity to exchange information about child care or simply to make friends.

CARE FOR SIBLINGS

I am occasionally asked if the baby massage can be also given to an older sister or brother. I explain that it can of course be used, especially if he or she feels stressed after having a baby sister or brother. Massaging his or her back, feet or hands in the using the same techniques as the baby massage is an effective way to soothe and help them to relax and calm. For children from the age of two to six years old, I advise that essential oils may also be included in the massage oil diluted to a concentration of 1%. In my experience, suitable essential oils for this age group are: *Lavandula angustifolia* (lavender), *Chamaemelum nobile* (Roman chamomile), *Citrus reticulata* (mandarin), *Rosa damascena* (rose otto), *Pelargonium graveolens* (geranium), *Boswellia carterii* (frankincense), *Citrus aurantium* ssp. *bergamia* (bergamot) and *Citrus paradisi* (grapefruit). After the age of six, the dose of essential oils in massage may be increased.

FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS

Some of the feedback that I have received from my clients is included in Table 1.

Table 1. Parental feedback following baby massage

'After starting baby massage, stability of the neck and bowel movement improved'

'I learned how to make physical contact with my baby through the baby massage course'

'As I have other children, I don't have much time to spend with my baby. I can focus on him during the massage and have a good time with him'

'Chatting with other mothers helped to relieve stress'

'Constipation problems have lessened and my baby is talking a lot'

'After bathing I give my baby a massage. She then drinks a lot and sleeps deeply till morning'

'Crying at night and fretting has decrease'

'Usually I do not have much time to spend with my baby; through baby massage I feel a sense of fulfilment'

'I can check my baby's body carefully during the massage'

CONCLUSION

My goal is that more parents come to know the effect and comfort of providing baby massage. Massage is a useful curative and preventative skill that parents can acquire. Babies in a relaxing and peaceful mood while being massaged give parents a sense of comfort and fulfilment. Baby massage techniques can also be adapted for adults. If I have time, I show parents how to perform the massage on one another. In doing so, parents can incorporate massage into their lives and hence reap the benefits of a relaxed and less stressful lifestyle that massage can offer. I cannot recommend baby massage highly enough for its benefits to the whole family unit. I have been privileged to witness many positive results. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation to the director and the staff members of the clinic whose help and understanding have made this baby massage class possible.