



Topic:

Does infant massage affect mental, motor, and/or social-emotional development?

“Ay, there’s the rub...”

Infant massage holds promise not yet confirmed by research

A type of infant massage that involves stroking a baby’s skin with moderate pressure and gently flexing and extending the arms and legs is often included as a standard procedure in hospital neonatal intensive care units across the United States. Yet an analysis of research to determine the benefits of this practice for babies at high risk for delays in development reveals that the available research is inadequate to recommend infant massage as a proven method for promoting the mental, motor, and/or social-emotional development of high-risk newborns.

Natalie G. Gallagher, Ph.D., of the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute, in cooperation with the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, examined the findings of nine studies that included a total of 311 young infants, 159 of whom received infant massage. The infants studied were considered at increased risk for developmental problems due to a variety of conditions, such as exposure to dangerous substances, difficulties during labor and delivery, low birth weight, premature birth, family factors, and others. While the majority of the researchers reported positive effects for the babies receiving massage, Dr. Gallagher discovered that overall poor research design and conduct make it impossible to rely on these conclusions.

The major problem is that the gains made by babies in the studies might be due to activities, treatments, or conditions other than the massages they received. In most of the studies, for example, researchers don’t say whether or not the practitioners giving the massages also talked, sang, or engaged the babies with their facial expressions during the massage. Such stimulating behaviors, in themselves, can influence a baby’s development. The challenge remains for researchers to conduct studies in ways that permit them to judge the direct merits and any long-term effects of infant massage specifically.

Research tells us:

Infant massage, as defined by a structured process involving stroking with moderate pressure combined with flexing/extending an infant’s limbs, cannot be recommended as an evidence-based practice until researchers develop ways to study it that eliminate other sensory influences that might explain improvements seen in participating infants. Long-term follow-up studies that examine possible delayed or lasting benefits of the treatment are also needed.



Take another look:

Visit www.researchtopractice.info to download the complete research synthesis by N. G. Gallagher (2003). Effects of infant massage on cognitive, motor, and social-emotional functioning in high-risk infants. *Bridges*, 2(12).

Acting on the evidence:

Stimulation of an infant’s senses — the pathways of touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound that a baby uses to perceive the world — is central to successful infant development. It very definitely should be encouraged. Available research, however, is not sufficient to recommend the infant massage practice that is the focus of this synthesis over other methods of sensory stimulation for high-risk newborns.