



Topic:

How contingent touch affects infants' learning and behavior

Research tells us:

Touching infants in ways they find pleasurable in response to their specific behaviors, parents and caregivers can help babies increase motor learning, promote positive social-emotional behavior, and decrease negative social-emotional behavior.



Acting on the evidence:

By paying attention to a baby's responses, you can discover what kinds of touch he enjoys most. Some babies might love having their feet stroked, while others might prefer gentle pats on the back or tummy. Use touch as a reward to encourage an infant to repeat desirable, positive behaviors like smiling and cooing.

More than “just a touch”

Research findings show that parents and caregivers have a wonderful way to promote infant learning and development right at their fingertips.

In fact, fingertips and hands, used to provide gentle pats and caresses in response to specific infant behaviors, serve as a form of reinforcement that encourages babies to move, vocalize, and act in many beneficial ways.

Tracy L. Masiello, Ph.D., a research scientist at the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, analyzed seven studies that looked at the way an infant's action is influenced by adult touch given in response to that action. A total of 186 healthy, full-term infants participated in the studies Dr. Masiello reviewed. When taken together, the findings clearly indicate that infants find various kinds of touch pleasurable and stimulating and tend to repeat movements and other behaviors when they realize the connection between their actions and repetition of the enjoyable touch.

Using touch in this way, that is letting it be a reward for a specific infant behavior, is called “contingent touch.” Dr. Masiello recommends that contingent touch be used by parents and caregivers as one of many social reinforcers to help infants to learn and grow. In natural adult-infant interactions, touch is only one of many types of social contingencies. Smiling, talking, singing, and playing with the infant, for example, are other behaviors adults are likely pair with touch to reinforce their infant's responses and learning in motor, social-emotional, and other areas of development.



Let's take a look ...

Parents can very naturally use touch and other responses as ways to encourage infants to repeat and practice desirable behaviors. Let's take a look:

Matt Davis is pleasantly surprised by how much he's enjoying the early weeks of his first-born's life. Baby Jamie's facial expressions, vocalizations, and behaviors are proving to be a constant source of amusement and fascination for Matt and his wife, Joy.

One surprise for Matt has been how easily father and son have developed little "games" that delight them both.

While spending time watching Jamie one evening, Matt notices the baby stretching his hands toward his father's face. Matt is so delighted by the gesture that he gives the baby a kiss on the back of his hand, then continues holding it as he talks happily and strokes the baby's arm with his index finger. In a moment he lets go. Just as he settles in to read the newspaper, he glances at Jamie and sees that the baby is reaching toward him again.

Chuckling, Matt stops what he's doing and kisses and holds Jamie's hand. "Hello, my funny little man," Matt says. "You like this, don't you?" Sure enough, when he lets go of Jamie's hand, Jamie stretches his arms toward his daddy again. Matt happily rewards him with another kiss.

"Hey, Joy!" he calls to his wife, "You have to come see this! Jamie's invented a new game!"



Baby is fascinated to discover that each time he babbles, daddy gently grasps his hand, rubs his palm, and smiles. Baby comes to realize, "I made that happen!"



When baby turns her head toward Mommy at the sound of Mommy's voice, she is rewarded again and again with a warm hand stroking her tummy.

Take another look:

Read or download the complete research synthesis in the *Bridges* section of www.researchtopractice.info:

Masiello, T. L. (2006). Influences of contingent touch on infant behavior. *Bridges*, 4(4).

Exciting print, web-based and multimedia materials of interest to parents and early childhood practitioners are available from the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, on the Web at www.researchtopractice.info.