



# The Power of Touch

**Crystal Miles** explores infant massage as a healing tool after a difficult or delayed start

“**I**nfant massage is not a fad. It is an ancient art that connects you deeply with the person who is your baby, and it helps you to understand your baby’s particular nonverbal language and respond with love and respectful listening.” Vimala McClure’s quote expertly expresses the power of infant massage which reaches far beyond the physical benefits. Baby massage courses often focus their marketing on the relief that massage can offer babies suffering with colic, constipation and teething, yet the benefits are many and are far reaching. You’d be forgiven for thinking that baby massage only benefits the recipient, but there is a wealth of evidence to highlight the positive effects on parents too, and these are literally at your fingertips.

Having worked with families over the past ten years, both antenatally and postnatally, one of my favourite attributes to infant massage is how healing it can be for both parent and baby after a difficult or delayed start. It’s common during the antenatal period, for parents to learn about the importance of oxytocin, and how essential this hormone is for bonding. It can peak during a vaginal delivery, or when breastfeeding with skin-to-skin contact, but where does that leave the parents that may have experienced a different beginning?

We know beyond doubt that there is nothing more healing than human touch. Our skin is our external brain; even just 1cm<sup>2</sup> contains around 5000 touch receptors. Some psychologists term our physical need for human contact, ‘touch or skin hunger’, and note that, to deny this hunger

can have profound emotional and even physical consequences. We are programmed to satisfy this need.

Studies show that infant massage is linked to a reduction in the incidence of postnatal depression and results in better interactions between mothers and babies. Parents notice improvements in areas such as their baby’s relaxation and sleep, as well as in their own feelings of relaxation and their confidence to recognise their baby’s needs.

Research also shows us that baby massage is effective in increasing mother-infant attachment and this has a lot to do with the hormone oxytocin. When we hold and touch our babies, make eye contact, kiss them, smell them and remain close to them, we have a wonderful release of oxytocin. Oxytocin expert Kerstin Uvnäs Moberg studies →







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→ the many benefits of oxytocin. She has found that when it is released – through touch, warmth and affectionate connection – it increases bonding and attachment, decreases blood pressure, improves blood circulation to parts of the brain, reduces muscle tension, provides pain relief, and increases the secretion of digestive enzymes and stomach acid, along with many other benefits. Oxytocin is the hormone that keeps us calm, happy, relaxed and, essentially, allows us to fall in love.

*"Thank you so much for making me and Isobel feel so very comfortable. Greatly helpful and invaluable for me as I start my new journey with her. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. It's helped me tremendously."*

Where extreme prematurity, surgery to baby or mother, or health prevent immediate skin-to-skin contact, Dr Nils Bergman, specialist in perinatal neuroscience, and his team have found that you can start again, even after weeks of separation, to build the skin-to-skin bond between parent and infant.

Skin-to-skin contact is not just for the immediate period following birth. So many of the benefits will continue as your child grows. An ideal way to experience this contact is to massage your baby. Infant massage is often used as a tool to help adoptive or foster parents, and families with additional needs, to build bonds with their babies through nurturing touch and connection. The International Association of Infant Massage (IAIM) will work with these families up to the age of 7. We also work with families of babies born prematurely.

Infant massage is not just for mothers, of course. Research has found that up to 1 in 10 new fathers can become depressed after having a baby. As well as raising their levels of oxytocin, massage

## AN INTRODUCTION TO NURTURING TOUCH

### PERMISSION

Asking permission is a key component of IAIM baby massage. Permission is always sought before we begin. This not only communicates respect and helps babies to learn about healthy, respectful touch, but it gives them a chance to get ready for the new experience and to identify that nurturing touch is about to begin.

Having undressed your baby, pour a small amount of oil into your palm and rub your hands together to warm them, making a swishing sound. Your baby will become alert to the sound and sight of this step.

Now, with still hands, show the baby the palm of your hands and connect eye to eye asking, "May I massage you now?"

The first time, the baby will not know what is about to happen, and you will have to use your intuition to proceed. However, as the baby becomes familiar with massage, they will know what to expect, and you can identify through your baby's cues if they are happy to proceed with the massage.

### CONTAINMENT HOLDS AND RESTING HANDS

Babies have an innate desire for nurturing touch, but they can have different thresholds for stimulation. To begin with, containment holds can be used to help your baby feel enclosed and secure, whilst still benefiting from skin-to-skin contact and loving touch.

To enjoy still touch, take a long, slow deep breath and gently, without pressure, hold your relaxed hands on your baby without moving them. You can use this technique to prepare for massage on a certain area, observing and waiting for your baby's feedback to continue. Or, if your baby shows signs that massage may be too much, you can answer them with gentle resting hands. This simple technique allows you both to benefit from loving touch until you are ready to move forward.



also increases the hormone prolactin in fathers. This promotes caregiving behaviour and, over time, directs brain reorganisation to favour these behaviours.

Bonding is a process and humans are resilient. The bonding process can be enhanced in many ways through touch, keeping your baby close and responsive parenting. Getting to know your baby through nurturing touch engages the senses and incorporates all the main elements of bonding when done respectfully and with love. Children are born with the innate desire to seek security and connection from a primary caregiver and secure attachment happens when parents are able to

recognise the cues of their child's behaviour and to offer them the support they need.

Having a baby is a colossal transition at the best of times. Feel confident that nurturing, loving touch is there for both you and your baby. It is never too late for humans to bond. ●

Photography by Sadie Wild.  
[www.sadiewildphotography.com](http://www.sadiewildphotography.com)

**Crystal Miles** is the founder of Connected Babies, offering IAIM instructor classes, family classes and a range of prenatal and postnatal services. [www.connectedbabies.co.uk](http://www.connectedbabies.co.uk)

When you and your baby are ready to proceed with structured massage strokes, search for a local IAIM infant massage instructor through [www.iaim.org.uk](http://www.iaim.org.uk) or refer to Vimala McClure's book, *Infant Massage: A Handbook for Loving Parents*.

