

The Benefits of Massaging Babies

By Lemise Kassim

The aim of this piece of research was to ascertain that massage had specific benefits as part of routine baby care.

It was expected that the results of this survey would feature subjects like relaxation, benefits for sleep assistance, and bonding. It was also expected that parents would find the techniques helpful with digestive problems, such as colic, constipation, and perhaps reflux. Secondary benefits might have been entertainment and fun, or simply a celebration of the baby's body.

The results did hold out some of these beliefs, and also highlighted some interesting and exciting observations, which had not been expected. Further research with larger numbers will need to be carried out to confirm some of the findings that have been touched upon briefly. These include in vitro fertilisation, postnatal depression, caesarean and premature birth, particularly in relation to the experience of the mother. The few respondents who commented on these areas did find that massage helped with their experiences.

The Survey

This was aimed at 100 clients who had attended at least one baby massage course held by 'Massage My Baby' in Brisbane. The course consisted of six x two hour sessions in which a group followed through a gentle stretching and massage routine for their babies under the guidance of Lemise. The course recognised the need for mothers (or other carers) to relax and be supported too. This latter fact did impinge on some of the replies, although this was not the main purpose of the survey.

Every client was therefore familiar with techniques of stretching and moving of babies' bodies for health and relaxation benefits. These were combined with a massage routine that included soothing effleurage strokes, kneading, percussive techniques, rubbing and squeezing. Correct use of oils and contraindications were also included, and participants were encouraged to ascertain and alleviate any issues experienced by their babies.

The survey questioned participants about their perception of how massage is beneficial, because as the primary carers they were using massage for problems identified by them. They were in an excellent position to report on the results of massage, from a 24-hour perspective! Simply observing immediate effects in the class does not give the whole picture.

Results

About a third (32 per cent) of the forms were returned, which is common for this kind of survey.

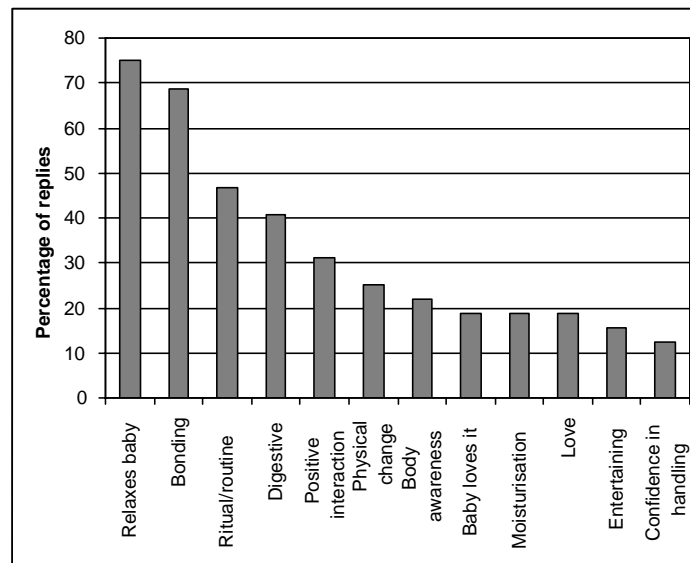
The results demonstrated that massage was beneficial for many common baby issues. The survey also showed some unexpected benefits of massage, which are of importance to mothers in particular.

Table 1
Age Range of Children in the Survey

Continuing massage after course	Stopped massage after course	Average age at start of course	Age now: up to 6 months	Age now: 6 months - 1 year	Age now: 1 - 2 years	Age now: over 2 years
32*	2	11 weeks	9	4	15	4

In the group of continuing massage, 14 reported occasional massage, and 17 continued regularly, one reported using the techniques on an older child, too. *In two cases siblings had attended the course, thus increasing numbers by two.

Figure 1: Reported Benefits



As can be seen from Figure 1, the main benefits of baby massage were reported as relaxation and bonding. It can be seen that massage has been incorporated as part of baby care routines in a large number of cases. Digestive issues (colic/wind/constipation), particularly “colic” came high on the list.

Troubleshooting of physical problems (in hips, legs or shoulders) with body awareness came fairly high. More discussion of the results with respect to sleep, bonding and colic will be outlined.

Some of the benefits which were mentioned in one or two replies also included: enhancement of growth and development, working out damage to muscle fibres with vaccine entry, relief of cradle cap, respiratory issues relieved, association of relaxation with smell of oil, nappy free time, intimacy, involvement of father and also of older siblings.

Sleep

A baby’s sleep patterns will be unique to each individual. Many parents become distressed when their child seems to be taking a long time adjusting to night-time sleeping, or when they simply don’t sleep during the day. A baby’s sleep cycles cannot be controlled, and sleep is not a skill to be learned, and the pattern will reflect the baby’s biological development. Parents nevertheless, can be distressed by disturbed sleep, which can be caused by pain, and this seemed to be the major issue arising in the survey.

Interestingly, some babies who had no problems experienced deeper and longer sleeps following massage. 58 per cent of babies with problems showed improved sleep, and positive sleep effects were observed in 68 per cent of babies whose sleep was not an issue. 69 per cent of respondents reported a positive effect from massage on sleeping. 69 per cent found their babies were quicker to settle, 23 per cent said their babies slept longer, and 22 per cent reported deeper sleep. As a result of the observed benefits, 59 per cent of parents have included massage as part of their baby care routine.

This is usually at bedtime after a bath. Only one respondent noted a negative effect, and she found that massage in the middle of the day altered the baby’s sleep pattern so he would sleep less at night. She was able to adjust her timing, and thus fit in better with her desired routine. See Figures 2 and 3 for a breakdown of these results.

Figure 2: Massage and Sleep

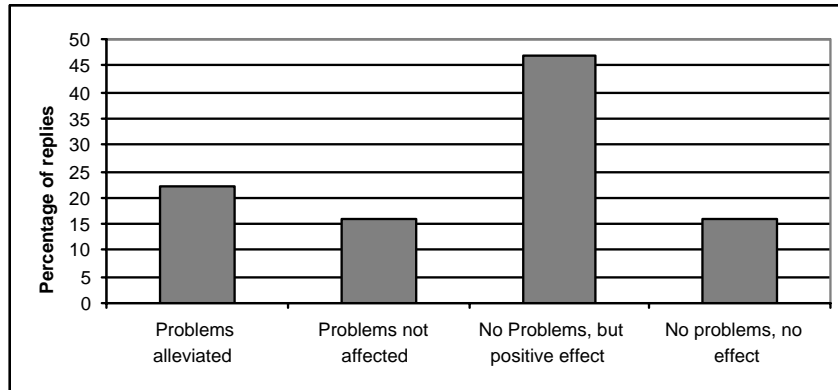
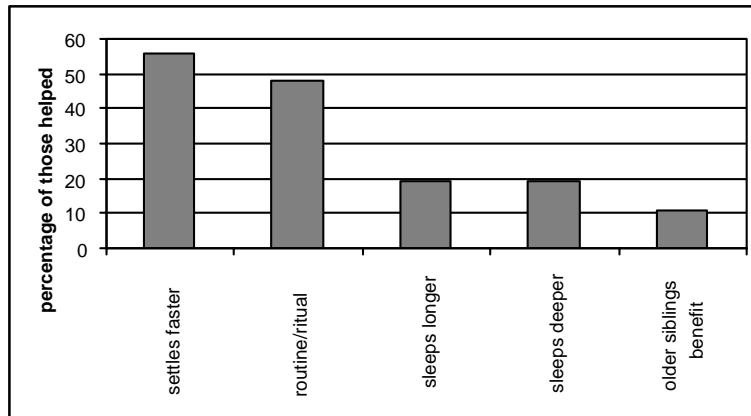


Figure 3: How Massage Helps with Sleep



Bonding

The respondents were requested to define bonding, and then how massage helped. Key words used in the replies, which give an overall feel for the perception of what bonding is, included:

- Communication
- One-on-one
- Relationship
- Connecting
- Contact
- Familiarity
- Learning
- Understanding
- Acceptance
- Together
- Discovery
- Closeness
- Emotional
- Physical
- Confidence
- Focus
- Intimacy.

Some typical answers for how massage helped were:

'Yes, yes, yes! Bonding is making a loving connection with baby through touch, sight and voice. Massage for Zac and me is definitely beneficial for making that connection. He will smile at me and look in my eyes when I first put the oil on him and occasionally he will get playful and wait for me to catch him. Usually it is a quiet, relaxed time where we just talk softly and make ooh and ahh noises. He loves it (so do I).'

'Bonding to me is the depth of closeness and intimacy felt with your baby which helps you tune into their needs and I have found the more bonded I have felt the more patience I have at tougher times. The greatest benefit I have found is the intimacy and bonding achieved from baby massage.'

'Bonding means developing a close relationship with each other, learning about each other and discovering all about your baby's likes and dislikes. Massage obviously helps with all these areas as it is a time when you can fully concentrate one-on-one with your baby, i.e. touch, eye contact, talking.'

'Relationship with baby – definitely nurtured with baby massage. Calm atmosphere, skin-on-skin, eye contact and sharing of pure indulgence together.'

'Bonding is creating a physical and emotional closeness with another person. I found that massage helped create a very close bond for me with my daughter. Having given birth by caesarean, I found my bond with her was not as strong as I had expected. After completing the baby massage course I now have a very special closeness with my daughter that I truly cherish.'

'Becoming emotionally close with your baby. The physical closeness of massage brings you emotionally closer to your baby. It is nice to learn how to make baby feel relaxed and happy.'

'Bonding – any activity that deepens our relationship. Having hands touch her skin, having a giggle and fun together while massaging. Finishing with a cuddle and breastfeed. The closeness of touching is very satisfying for me as a mother to do. It is one way I get to touch her all over – to stop and express my love for her through caressing her skin.'

Colic

Colic came high as a major problem that is alleviated by massage. Colic is described as a set of symptoms which arise in some babies, and commonly include sharp, intermittent pain and distension of the abdomen. It is accompanied by difficulty expelling wind, fussing while feeding, and crying and screaming. Severity of symptoms varies from day to day, and time of day. Babies may draw their knees up for relief, and this action can be mimicked by manual movements in the massage routine. Onset may be immediately after birth, or can develop later. In most instances all is well by four months, but symptoms can continue beyond.

There is much debate in medical circles about the actual existence of this problem (Robyn Parker), but in my classes it has become obvious that babies do present with a painful abdomen, and wind can also be relieved, if this is the cause. In some instances the cause of the wind pain can be food related and some mothers manage it with diet. In some instances it is not possible to ascertain the reason, so it is imperative to have a method of relieving the pain. Massage seems to be the most successful means of achieving this.

Mothers arrive at class saying that their babies have colic and are in pain, or that they have difficulty getting rid of wind and that their tummy hurts. During massage sessions, we can identify painful, tense areas on the abdomen, which are alleviated with either the exiting of wind or welcoming smiles from relieved babies. These are my observations from teaching. From the survey results, this area of concern is helped by massage, with 13 (41 per cent) respondents reporting relief through massage, and many reporting the softening of the abdomen and relief of wind even when wind was not perceived as a problem.

Discussion

The survey supports the hypothesis that massage is useful as part of baby care. 'Crabby arsenic hour - that terrible time of night where everything goes wrong and nothing helps - except a nice bath and a relaxing massage. Zac loves his bath and enjoys having his clothes off. Instead of a horrible screaming time, it's lots of fun.' Many mothers in the survey already use it regularly and have continued as their child grows, still incorporating massage at two years and over. (Table 1)

'This year I have been massaging my son (who is 6 years and started grade 1) at bedtime. I found it really relaxed him and calmed him and he also talked to me a lot at this time. This helped us both at a difficult time while he was getting used to full time school days with the increased physical, emotional and intellectual demands.'

Others have even reported including massage as a family experience, transferring techniques to older siblings, and their partners. Children will still ask for massage into their teens. Parents can play an important role in their child's development, and indeed, some were even noting physical and emotional development as a benefit.

'I carry out massage most evenings after bath time with 'big brother', a four year old, on the bed. It is part of our winding down before bed. It is bonding between mother and baby and baby's other siblings. Both now take turns to massage one another and stroke Mum too! It is learning about 'safe' touch, especially for my older child (protective behaviours).'

The benefits of touch in child development have been widely reported and are now established in premature baby units as a means of promoting growth and development. Bonding came high up on the list (69 per cent) as a benefit of massage, which means it is highly appropriate for parents to learn the techniques. Massage therapists are not really the ones who need to bond with the baby. Nevertheless we need to be available to teach good techniques, and have knowledge of oils and safe practise.

If bonding in a child's first relationships is achieved, then this sets them up for good experiences later in life. Touch is also implicated later in self-esteem and confidence issues. Another good benefit was giving mothers confidence in handling their babies, and permission to help their babies when problems arise. Mothers who lack confidence may find they become depressed or feel inadequate.

'Birth was not traumatic, but baby was in special care from birth for approximately three days without Mum's touch. I was worried about bonding, having heard how skin on skin was so important following birth. She was three days without me, I am no longer worried, seeing her reactions, and loving my touch and time.'

'I had postnatal depression after he was born and throughout the massage course I slowly become more and more like my usual self and felt a much closer bond to my little boy.'

Where sleep is seen as an issue, then massage can be helpful to relax all parties concerned. It will help alleviate any abdominal pain and thus encourage more peaceful sleep. The reports on settling and calming babies before bedtime showed massage was essential in some instances.

As can be seen, there can be immediate and long-term effects from carrying out baby massage. As massage therapists, it makes our work very rewarding and satisfying to be able to see such positive results. This is another benefit of baby massage, and we do not have to wait weeks to see the results, babies respond so quickly, that the results are immediate. It is much better to trouble-shoot problems at this early age, than to leave them unattended for years, until they present as adults with conditions which could have been prevented.



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the parents who gave up their time to reply to the survey. I would also like to thank Dr David Fairbairn and Tessa Alger for critical reading of the manuscript.

Lemise Kassim has trained in the UK and Australia. She holds an Honours degree in Biology, Diploma in Massage Therapy, and 22 years of experience of working with Women's Health. She runs group and individual 'Massage My Baby' courses for mothers and provides training for massage therapists. She brings in diverse techniques, being a Bush Flower Essence practitioner, counsellor, mother of two (aged 15 and 10) and experienced Baby and Pregnancy Massage Therapist.

References

- Touching, Ashley Montagu
- The Book of Baby Massage, Peter Walker
- Baby & Child Massage, Lemise Kassim
- Infant Massage, Sajeela Cormack
- Getting your Child to Sleep, Vicki Lansky
- Baby Love, Robyn Parker
- Lemise Kassim, Baby Massage in Touchline May & August 1998
- Lemise Kassim, Baby Massage in Natural Parenting Spring 2003
- Rachael Gleeson, The Curse of Colic in Natural parenting, Summer 2003

Journal of the Australian Association of 'Massage Therapists
February 2004.

http://www.aamt.com.au/journals/Feb2004/1_benefits_of_baby_massage.doc