

The POWER OF TOUCH: MASSAGE FOR CHILDREN

Originally published in *Tuesday's Child Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 8, August 1998, the following excerpt is from the introduction. For more information on massage for children with special needs, please consult Chapter 6 of *Pediatric Massage Therapy*.

“ When I volunteered to bring massage to Muscular Dystrophy Camp in St. Louis, Missouri, I was overwhelmed by the youngsters’ responses. They all wanted to get on the table, the response was incredible. When we couldn’t get them up on the table, I worked on them in their wheelchairs. I let them tell me where they wanted me to work. Every one of them had a different ache or pain and some had numb places where they wanted to feel again. These kids desperately wanted to be touched.”

— Massage Therapist Terrie Yardley-Nohr¹

Sensitive massage is a unique type of therapy that can speak directly to many of the greatest needs of children with disabilities. It is both stimulating and relaxing, nurtures children emotionally, and feels terrific. It can help children release tension, become more aware of their bodies, and form a body image that is positive and strong.

Recent research on massage for hospitalized newborns, autistic children, child psychiatric patients, children with asthma and other special groups has documented many of these benefits.² Healthcare professionals from many different disciplines have discovered the usefulness of massage for children with special needs. Psychologist Dr. Tiffany Fields, in research done at the University of Miami Medical School, has proved that hospitalized newborns who are receiving gentle daily massages have a great advantage over non-massaged ones: they gain more weight on the same amount of formula, have lower levels of stress hormones, and are ahead of non-massaged babies in motor and neurological development. Speech-language pathologist Peggy Jones Farlow uses massage to create a multi-sensory, interactive learning experience for physically and developmentally challenged children. Speech-language pathologist Pamela Marshalla uses massage as part of oral sensorimotor therapy to help developmentally-delayed children have normal oral-tactile sensitivity, improve jaw movements for speech, tongue movements for normal feeding and speech, and to treat drooling and lip retraction. (Marshalla, Pamela, [Oral-Motor Techniques in Articulation Therapy](#), video, available from Innovative Concepts, 7023 Brooklyn Ave. NE, Seattle, WA 98115.) Yoga teacher Sonia Sumar uses massage to help special needs children lay still during specific relaxation periods. Occupational therapist Mary Fuhr has taught massage to parents of special needs infants as a way to help parents recognize and appreciate their infants’ unique qualities, help parents communicate more with their infants to enhance learning, and finally to enjoy their special needs baby just as any other new parent enjoys their baby. All these professionals agree that during childhood, because there is rapid brain growth and the child’s self-image is

being formed, is an especially important time for someone with special needs to receive massage.

Most disabled children are under constant stress, which can have a profound physical and emotional effect. Massage is one powerful way for them to release their stress and tension. I myself have seen children who were emotionally shut down from the stress they had been through, become much happier and emotionally relaxed when they began to receive regular massage. Because they are more likely to be socially isolated and touched less than other children, massage can be especially important in satisfying their need for touch. Children with limited mobility, such as those in wheelchairs, may be deprived of a tremendous amount of normal sensory stimulation; massage can help meet this need. It can be readily adapted to the specific needs of children with a variety of disabilities. Many other children with disabilities other than the ones discussed in the remainder of this article have been helped by massage.