

## Reach Out and Touch Someone

by Pam Leo

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"One of our most important parenting tools is literally at our fingertips." - Pam Leo

In many other cultures babies experience abundant touch. They are and always have been breast-fed, massaged, carried or worn in slings during the day and beside their parents at night. Cross-cultural studies show that infants, who are cared for in this way are: more social, more alert, less fussy and restless, sleep better, have smoother movements, and better intellectual and motor development than infants who spend the majority of their time out of human contact, untouched, in infant seats, car seats, swings, strollers, and cribs. Touch is one of our basic needs. As early as the 7th week of pregnancy, a baby reacts to touch. Touch is the earliest sense to develop and the last one to leave us at the end of life. Studies show that both people and animals develop very slowly and even die if they are denied touch. Mariana Caplan, in her book, *Untouched*, states that, "Many people actually become sick because they are touch-starved. Dr. Theresa Crenshaw explains that touch alters the chemical composition of the body and states that, "Lack of touch is as detrimental to health as lack of Vitamin C. Children crave and biologically need nurturing touch for the nervous system to develop normally and for optimal growth and development.

My passion for sharing this information on the value and necessity of nurturing touch was recently rekindled when I attended an all-day workshop sponsored by Barbara Freethy at Transdisciplinary Workshops, Inc. The workshop was called "From Eye Contact To Nurturing Touch: Ways of Creating Secure Attachments, Fulfilling Relationships, & Positive Emotional Development From Infancy Through Adolescence." The presenters, Daniel Hughes, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Maine and author of *Building the Bonds of Attachment in Deeply Troubled Children* and Sylvie Hetu, BSc, President of the Board of The International Association of Infant Massage, and infant massage trainer, made a powerful case for parents learning to provide their children with nurturing touch.

The focus of the training was learning both how essential touch is to children's physical growth and development and the key role it plays in securing, strengthening, and maintaining the bond between infants and children with their parents and caregivers. Contrary to the old warning that holding babies too much will spoil them, we learned that the opposite is true. The more holding, carrying, rocking, swaying, swinging, caressing, stroking, hugging and game playing we do, the more we provide the necessary sensory stimulation for brain growth and the vital elements that promote a strong parent child bond. In her book, *"The Vital Touch,"* Sharon Heller, developmental psychologist, tells us that "Touch is not an emotional fringe benefit for infants. It's as necessary as the air they breathe."

In the first two years of life 80% of a baby's brain growth is occurring. Babies who receive abundant touch will be more likely to reach the upper limits of their intellectual potential. Studies

show that the brain of a child develops 20-30% more if they have received massage or touch often compared to children who have not. Brain growth is only one of the physical benefits of touch. Touch sends a message to the pituitary gland to release growth hormones. When we hold a baby, two-thirds of his body is stimulated; when we put him in a crib or other container only half of his body surface is stimulated. Wood and plastic cannot provide the varied motion, body warmth, touch, sounds, smiles, or eye contact that create the sensory stimulation and vital nurturing elements of strong bonding that babies need to thrive. Our modern baby containers and toys are poor substitutes for human contact.

Tiffany Field, who developed the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami, reported a 47% weight gain in preemies who were massaged for 15 minutes, three times a day for 10 days. Follow up on these massaged infants showed they had better intellectual and motor development, were more social, more alert, less fussy and restless, slept better and had smoother movements than babies who did not receive the massaging. As Heller points out, massaging babies is nothing new. Millions of mothers in India, Nigeria, Uganda, Bali, Fiji, New Guinea, New Zealand, and The Soviet Union have always massaged their babies. What do these millions of mothers know that we would do well to learn?

Tiffany Field's research has documented that, among other benefits, massage: 1) decreases the production of stress hormones, 2) reduces pain associated with teething and constipation, 3) reduces colic and 4) helps induce sleep. While all babies benefit from massage, it is even more crucial for the many babies who do not receive the abundant touch and sensory stimulation from being breast-fed, being carried in arms or in a sling and sleeping with their parents.

The beauty of infant massage is that the babies are not the only ones who benefit. Studies have shown that the person giving the massage benefits from the touch as well. As soon as we touch or are touched in a nurturing way, we release prolactin and oxytocin, which help us to feel good, relaxed and caring. In my prenatal parenting class, "Bonding With Your Baby" I encourage all expectant parents who want to secure and maintain a strong bond with their baby to learn and do infant massage. Parents can learn infant massage by attending classes at birth centers, or hospitals, or by contacting The International Association for Infant Massage at [www.iaim.net](http://www.iaim.net) for information on classes. Massage provides much of the touch so critical to an infant's optimal growth, development, and secure bonding, but infants are not the only ones who need touch and benefit from massage. Every day of our life, children and adults of all ages need nurturing touch and would benefit from massage.

As I have researched and read more and more about the healing power of touch through massage, the list of benefits continues to grow. It has been shown to reduce stress, improve the immune system, decrease anxiety and depression in children with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and reduce emotional stress and somatic symptoms in adults with chronic fatigue syndrome, to name just a few. We can become skilled at massage but we all already have the healing power of touch at our fingertips. I was unaware of the benefits of massage when my children were babies but I'm happy to say that my young granddaughters and I mutually enjoy a "Grama-massage" at every opportunity. They have taught me that children can give great massages too.

One of the most exciting things we learned about in the workshop I attended is a new program in elementary schools in England called, "Massage in Schools." Children who wish to participate have the opportunity to give and receive a back massage. Whether a child gives a massage, receives a massage or even if a child is only in the classroom observing the massage, the social

and educational benefits of massage in schools are already being observed and acknowledged by teachers and educators. Massage in the school setting is a tool to provide:

- A way to accept oneself and others
- Increased tolerance
- Decreased aggression
- Increased alertness
- Increased concentration
- A way for learning empathy
- A feeling of being individually acknowledged
- The opportunity to say "yes" or "no" to touch
- A safe and trusting atmosphere
- Support and care for the child
- Increased self-esteem

Our children are growing up in turbulent times. Given the state of our world today perhaps the most important things our children need to learn in school are addressed in the above list of benefits of "Massage in Schools."

As a parent educator, child-care provider trainer and family consultant I am always excited to discover and share new information that will empower parents, care providers and teachers to more fully meet the needs of children. We can all learn how to provide the nurturing touch that children need to thrive. We can also take responsibility for enriching the environments our children are in when they are not with us. "Massage in Schools" will only happen here, in our children's schools, if we, the parents and teachers, make our voices heard and advocate for it.

If you are a parent, caregiver or teacher who wants information on learning massage or bringing a "Massage in Schools" program to your child's school, contact Barbara Freethy on email [transdis@rcn.com](mailto:transdis@rcn.com)

The gift of nurturing touch is the gift of love, let us give it to our children abundantly.

Suggested reading:

- "The Vital Touch" by Sharon Heller, Ph.D.
- "Untouched" by Mariana Caplan, M.A.
- "Touching" by Ashley Montagu
- "The Continuum" Concept by Jean Liedloff
- "Infant Massage" by Vimala Schneider McClure