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Whether it's a massage, a hug or simply a cheeky tickle, babies love to be touched. NICOLE MADIGAN-EVEREST looks at the joys and importance of bonding through physical contact

Staying in TOUCH

Imagine a life without human physical contact; lacking the warm embrace of a loved one, the touch of a hand holding yours, a friendly arm around you. A simple touch can ease the pain of a difficult moment, make a happy time even more special, or send a shiver down your spine.

Though we have an innate desire for human touch, as adults we may take physical affection for granted – with our partners, our parents, our friends and our children. But more than a want, human contact is a basic need, right from the moment we enter the world. And it's at this point in our lives – the very beginning – that receiving loving touch is perhaps the most crucial.

"In the womb, the baby is constantly being touched by the fluid in the sac in which she is growing," says child development expert Dr Jane Williams. "From birth, touch is extremely important as this is how babies learn to love, to feel the world around them and to move."

This is one reason why mothers are encouraged to have their babies placed on their chest immediately after birth to breastfeed, with skin-to-skin feeding recommended throughout infancy. Of course, feeding your baby, be it with the breast or bottle, isn't the only way to bond physically with your newborn...

A deeper meaning
According to Dr Williams, meaningful touch can be any type of loving human contact, such as cuddling, stroking, playing, tickling, massaging or simply holding a hand.

The proven benefits of touch are broad and far-reaching, ranging from aiding bub's mental and physical development to encouraging bonding and nurturing relationships. Studies have even shown that premature babies may develop and gain weight more quickly when they are held and touched regularly.

Touch is equally important for babies with health problems, with research and practice indicating that many sick babies improve and leave the hospital quicker when they receive regular physical contact.

As well as the proven medical and developmental benefits, physical contact is also an integral part of the parent/child bonding process.

"Touch is an important form of communication with babies," Dr Williams explains. "Being touched in gentle and loving ways lets the infant know that she is loved and cared for. That's why we hug our children, family and friends – we are letting them know that we care."

Rub-a-dub-dub
Babies yearn for security through physical contact with their regular caregivers. Aside from holding, cuddling and feeding, baby massage provides one of the best opportunities for bonding through skin-to-skin contact.

"Baby massage [involves] a caring touch and lets the baby know that you love and care for her," says Dr Williams. "It stimulates the skin and muscles of the body and increases blood circulation. It's also helpful for stimulating digestion and helping with the passing of wind."

A mother of two, Alina Derevyanko completed a baby massage course in order to incorporate this type of loving touch into her babies' daily routines. She says the impact on her kids was remarkable: "Even if massage may not cure the flu, the very act of touching will relax and soothe a stressed or uncomfortable baby," she says. "I saw my babies fall asleep while receiving foot rubs and watched their noses stop running after warming chest rubs."

Dads – do it, too!
Massage is also an excellent way for fathers to experience meaningful physical contact with their newborns.

Some new fathers may feel detached from their infants, because they don't ›



7-STEP BABY MASSAGE

Before starting, make sure the room you're in is nice and warm, and that bub is comfy. If you're using oil, be sure to have tested it on a small bit of her skin (and yours) 24 hours beforehand, to make sure there are no allergy issues. Once you're all set, follow our seven-step baby massage, adapted from techniques approved by the International Association of Infant Massage, and bond with bub!

1 Start with your baby on her back, her head cradled in your hands. Make sure you maintain eye contact and talk softly and in a soothing manner. Experts say this is the time to 'ask permission' for the massage to go ahead, a good early lesson in personal space and touch. If all is well, start by making small circles around her head with your fingertips.

2 Next, gently smooth her forehead using the flats of your fingers, then move to the sides of her face and gently massage the jaw hinges, near her ears.

3 Move down to bub's chest and, using smooth movements, stroke upwards and outwards from the centre, then down, as though making a heart. Move to her shoulders and rub down each arm three or four times, before gently stroking the palms of her hands.

4 Proceed to bub's belly, rubbing softly in a circular, clockwise motion.

5 Starting at the hips, rub down each leg a few times and finish by gently pressing all over the soles of her feet.

6 Gently roll your baby onto her tum and stroke your palms across her back, perpendicular to her spine, from bottom to top, before 'combing' your fingers from the top of her back to her bottom, either side of her spine. Never put pressure directly on the spine and never push down too hard.

7 When you're done with bub's back, roll her over gently and return to the starting position, holding eye contact and cradling her head in your hands.

feel 'needed' in the same way as mothers. This underscores the need for dads to try something new if they aren't experiencing the bonding that they thought they might.

Even if Daddy doesn't learn the art of infant massage, that's okay – simply touching his baby's skin, maintaining eye contact and talking quietly to her can produce a calming, natural bonding session.

For Daniel Stephens, whose wife was in intensive care when their daughter, Skye, was born, touch played an important role in being able to immediately connect with his new child, who was placed into special care after birth.

"I wanted Skye to know that she was not alone, that she was safe," says Daniel. "I sat with her, talked to her and kissed her."

According to the proud father, this regular physical contact also increased his confidence in being Skye's sole family connection at the time. "I was looking after her

by myself and I knew that she relied on me," he says. "Touch was so important – it made it feel so real."

With mother and baby safely back at home, both parents continued to physically connect with Skye, something they do with their second child, too. "I like spending time with my children, kissing them, telling them I love them," Daniel says. "It's important that I am there for them, too."

I think that [massage has] created a life-long impression, which will bear fruit throughout our lives"

Touchy advice

Despite the obvious benefits of loving touch for infants, there is an increasing amount of often conflicting information that is given to new parents which can leave them feeling confused about how much physical affection is best to give their babies.

Not wanting to raise a spoilt or clingy child, Donna resisted

"As a first-time mum, I wanted to do everything right," says Donna Slattery. "I was getting so much conflicting advice that I decided to put my trust in the word of the early childhood nurse at the clinic. That meant there was no nursing to sleep, no holding the baby if he did not need to be settled and

definitely no co-sleeping. It was all routine, routine, routine."

Although this went against Donna's instincts, she

decided to follow the advice and keep it up. "I became paranoid that I would spoil my baby by giving him too many cuddles," she says. "I figured he was all cuddled out by the time visitors came and left, that I should not be cuddling him too."

Donna says the difference was significant. "My second child is a lot more confident and loves cuddles, but is not clingy. She never has a problem when it's time for bed or a nap – she just snuggles in and goes to sleep."

Beyond the baby years

According to counsellor Julie Parker, the importance of physical contact extends well beyond infancy.

"A child who grows up feeling comfortable with both receiving and giving physical affection is much more likely to feel comfortable with her own body, appearance and body image," she says. "She is much more likely to feel that she is someone who is worthy, special and lovable. This in turn makes her much more likely to have positive feelings about her own body and [have good] self-esteem."

For Alina, as her two children grow older, she continues to be amazed by aspects of their development which she attributes to the wonders of regular massage.

"They are gentle to one another and often my son pats my daughter on her back when she is upset to soothe her," she says. "I think that it's created a life-long impression,

which will bear fruit throughout our lives. Perhaps as they get older they may feel more trusting towards me, or when they are angry teenagers I will still be able to communicate with them using touch."

Indeed, Dr Williams believes that regular physical contact continues to play a vital role even as children develop into adolescents. "While they may not be as open to it as they were when they were children, a goodnight kiss or a hug when they are going away for a period of time is a great way for parent and child to remain connected," she says.

For Donna, touch and physical affection continue to be a staple part of her family's home life.

"We are all very cuddly now, and if any of the kids is feeling a bit sad or having a bad day, they know they can just come to Mum and have a bit of a cuddle. These are the best things you can give your children – touch and time."★

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