

INFANT MASSAGE – THEN AND NOW

GESTATION, BIRTH, AND GROWTH

Vimala McClure

In 1973 Vimala McClure found herself working in a little orphanage in northern India. It was summer, and extremely hot. Her money ran out quickly and the orphanage barely subsisted on donations solicited door-to-door and fruits and vegetables from their garden. Most of Vimala's time was spent in survival tasks – washing clothes, drawing water from the well, cooking strange foods over a crude cowdung-heated hearth. The little girls who were her charges were often sick and required a lot of attention. One night as Vimala was helping to get the girls to sleep, she noticed the oldest of the girls – she was around twelve years old – massaging the youngest, a baby of about six months. Vimala was mesmerized by the rhythmic strokes by practiced hands, and the rhythmic song sung low and sweet. She positioned herself so she could observe the whole massage and noticed the baby falling asleep at the end, as the girl's hands expertly rolled and gently shook the baby's arms and legs.

Vimala learned that this was a routine practiced every night before sleep, the older girls massaging the babies. She asked them to show her how and they were eager to teach her. They explained that in most homes the mother massages all the little ones every day. The massage was thought to be therapeutic and to help calm the baby's *chi* or vital energy.

During her last week there, Vimala succumbed to malaria. When she was delirious with fever, all the women in the neighborhood came to look after her. They massaged her body and sang to her, and alternated using tepid water and coconut oil until her fever broke. Vimala says she will never forget the feeling of their hands and hearts touching her.

On her way to the train station after a tearful goodbye at the orphanage several weeks later, the rickshaw stopped to let a buffalo cart go by. To her right was a shanty – just a few boards and some canvas—where a family lived by the roadside. A young mother sat in the dirt with her baby across her knees, lovingly massing him and singing. As Vimala watched her she thought, there is so much more to love than material wealth. This mother had so little, yet she could offer her baby this beautiful gift of love and security, a gift that would help to make him a compassionate human being.

Vimala thought about all the children she had known there and how loving, warm, and playful they were in spite of their so-called disadvantages. They took care of each other and they accepted responsibility without reservation. Perhaps, Vimala thought, they were able to be so loving, so relaxed and natural because they had been loved like this as infants, and infants have been loved like this in India for thousands of years. A seed was planted in Vimala's mind, and she returned home with both joyful anticipation of the future and sadness for what she had to leave behind.

In 1976 Vimala was expecting her first child. She spent most of her pregnancy reading and writing about childbirth and touch, and decided she wanted to be involved in some aspect of parenting or childbirth education. After her baby's birth she decided to practice the Indian massage on her baby every day, and was thoroughly delighted with the experience and its results. She began to put together all the information she had learned about infant growth and development, and all the applicable research on touching. At that time most of the research was about animals, and she concluded there must be a similar effect on human babies as in other mammals. She incorporated Swedish strokes and some ideas from reflexology and yoga (she had taught yoga for ten years), experimenting with her baby and taking detailed notes on his changes. She then named the strokes, put together a curriculum for a five week course and began to teach in her home. For the next few years these activities, along with raising her children (she had another baby two years later) consumed all of her time.

Vimala learned how to use the medical library, and with babies in tow, would spend hours poring through journals to find data to validate what she was learning from the babies in her classes. Vimala wrote her book, *Infant Massage: a Handbook for Loving Parents* in 1977, and began to receive invitations to speak at various functions. Eventually, several childbirth educators approached her and requested her to train them to teach her course. Thus, the International Infant Massage Association was born.

A year later, a baby products company published the first edition of her book, and a year after that Bantam Books bought the rights and Vimala re-wrote and illustrated the book. Since then, three more editions of the book have been published and it has become the best-selling standard for Infant Massage world-wide, translated in eight languages. Vimala wrote *Infant Massage: a Handbook for Instructors* in 1979 and spent the next several years training instructors. The next step was to train some of those instructors to be Instructor Trainers. Since then, the organization has spread to over 40 countries around the world and is known as the gold standard for Infant Massage instruction. Deanna Elliott, a professional certified Massage Therapist, joined Vimala early on, and participated in one of the first training sessions for Instructor Trainers. She then became a Trainer of Trainers and has spent the last 27 years teaching, traveling, and documenting her work with parents and infants.

(Vimala McClure is a writer, having written five books and numerous magazine articles. She is the founder of the Infant Massage Association and continues her work from her home in Longmont, Colorado. Vimala is very dedicated to seeing infant massage become a global parenting tradition.)

LONG-TERM FINDINGS WITH WEEKLY USE

Deanna Elliott

When a baby is newly arrived in the world he or she can be sore from being curled up in the womb for an extended period of time and then extended outward. Often arms and legs are tangled around like pretzels and cords are interwoven into the mix creating quite the

posturing for the baby to exist within. If the parent incorporates infant massage into the daily routine the process of doing the massage will assist the child to release and relax. Sometimes this can include crying as the baby communicates to the parent the discomfort of womb postures in contrast to the extension of life in the outer world. The massage encourages the little one to release those traumas and come into the body in a much fuller way thus leading to a heightened sense of presence in the body. This leads to more eye contact, greater listening skills and healthier eating and elimination habits. Learning is easier and physical dexterity is much more optimal. Confidence in life and self are much higher.

We live in a time when attachment disorder is of huge concern. Many children are raised in infant day care centers 40 hours a week with minimal contact with primary caregivers who are stretched already with the demands of their work. These children are the ones who fall between the cracks so often for they simply lack consistent contact with anyone for strong bonding. Not having any other way of coping they may disassociate from being fully present in the body as a way to cope and this can lead to many behavioral and learning problems. However, there is a tool that can assist the baby, the parent and the centers that house these children. If the parent does infant massage at the end of the day with the baby before bed the bonding is reinforced in both directions and many processes add to the baby's healthy development. For the parent, knowing they have just given this nourishing process to the baby reduces guilt. For the baby, quality time with the parent every day can't help but re-connect the loving bond between the two and release the accumulated stress of the day.

Each time the parent massages the baby there is increased bonding, increased symmetry around the midline of the body resulting in greater balance between right and left sides of the body. In addition, there is increased myelination of the nerve sheath meaning there is more coating on the nerve bundles in the brain, making it easier to cope with outer forms of stress.

Other benefits include increased self-awareness and increased self esteem because they are getting the messages that "you are loved; you belong." Increased regulation of the intestinal region and decreased colic have been seen, along with increased output of antibodies, circulation, and deeper respiration. Other benefits include decreased toxicity as it is moved out of the colon. Last but not least there is an increased tendency toward compassionate behavior later on. If a mother is carrying a baby inside her body and she herself is in chronic stress the majority of the blood supply is going to the development of the reptilian brain with less going to the frontal lobes. This leads to a baby who is in fight-or-flight mode most of the time, an extremely high stress way to grow. The body is "told" as it was developing that the outer environment is one of alarm so they, too, are in a state of alarm. They come into the world in a state of alarm and stay there unless there is an intervention to change that. Infant massage is the perfect way to redistribute the blood supply by virtue of the increased circulation, release the stress of life from the birthing process, and calm the baby into a new state of being. This again leads to a personality that is geared to compassion and openness rather than survival and defensiveness. We have all seen the many articles and television specials on

inappropriate touch with adults and infants/children. Yet all humans need constructive touch or they simply cannot survive. If infant massage is incorporated into a baby's life early on he or she has a reference for constructive, healthy touch.

There are some other factors to consider in regard to children in our culture at this time. It has been found in research that two things may cause brain dysfunction. They are extended time in front of the television and extended time away from primary caregivers. Many children are in front of television at least six hours a day and away from parents in day care centers 40 hours a week. What is the antidote? In both cases infant massage can become a balance. It will enhance left-right brain development and symmetry in the body and will deepen bonding with the family. In a culture where quality time is hard to find this ancient indigenous art can give us so very much to keep our families in touch with each other and self.

(Deanna Elliott is an instructor-trainer of 27 years for Infant Massage USA, the American chapter of the International Association of Infant Massage with their base in Sweden. In addition, she has produced a documentary called *Cellular Echoes, Environmental Influences in the Journey From the Womb to the World*. The subject is imprinting for animals and humans from preconception into the early years. Contemporary scientific research is compared to tribal birth wisdom in a cross cultural exploration of this phenomena. The inspiration for this film came from years of work with infants and the incorporation of touch into their daily routine. The goal is to assist the average person to understand how all experiences from conception forward are stored in cellular memory in the tissue. The application of massage will assist the body to release the difficult experiences that occurred during the formation phases (pre-conception, conception, gestation, birth and bonding). DeAnna is very dedicated to seeing infant massage become a global parenting tradition.)