

Dads and Baby Massage - extra special.

There are lots of ways that dads can enhance bonding with their babies - from nappy changing, feeding, babywearing and bathing them but, baby massage is something that **bit extra special**.

Skin is the largest organ in the body, and touch is the first sense to develop. In the first few months of life, touch is used more often than hearing, sight, or smell as a way to learn about the physical world and to develop close, meaningful relationships. Touch is a powerful communicator because it often mirrors our own feelings toward other individuals. Ultimately, your baby is able to sense how you feel about them by the manner in which you touch them.

The same massage benefits for adults apply to babies. It boosts immune systems, improves circulation, balances respiration, relieves pain and relaxes muscles. Massage can support a baby's sense of self, improve the quality of sleep, relieve digestive pains and advance development. It is an act of love and comfort that stimulates all the systems of the body and releases oxytocin, the cuddle hormone, and endorphins, natural pain killers, in both parent and child.

Forty years ago, dads often relegated to the waiting room as the birth of their baby took place behind closed doors. Fast-forward and those doors have been thrown wide open. Increasingly, today's fathers want to be emotionally bonded with their babies. However, men often feel dissatisfied with their ability to form this meaningful relationship. They often worry they may be disadvantaged in developing this special relationship because their partner may appear to have more opportunities and to be better equipped through various anatomical, physiological, and psychological adaptations (e.g. breastfeeding and greater responsiveness to infant cues - this however is not altogether true).

Creating a bond should begin at birth, and research has shown that massage can serve as one of the building blocks for paternal-child bonds.

A study from the Touch Research Institute in Miami found that dads who massaged their babies were "more expressive and showed more enjoyment and more warmth during floor-play interactions with their infants". Dads also experienced increased self-esteem as a parent and babies tended to have more direct eye contact with their dads, smiled at them and vocalised more.

Another study in the Journal of Perinatal Education yielded similar results after observing two groups of 12 babies and their fathers for four weeks. Fathers in the experimental group massaged their babies, while dads in the control group did not. After massaging their babies, the dads demonstrated a decrease in their stress scores. The researchers concluded that infant massage is a "viable option for teaching fathers caregiving sensitivity." Additionally, the results suggest that dads who massage their infants experienced "increased feelings of competence, role acceptance, spousal support, attachment and health by decreasing feelings of isolation and depression."

Infant Massage is a safe activity for fathers and their babies, no research to date, conducted over the last 25 years, has ever reported harmful effects of massaging babies.



Pleasant early nurturing contact can begin with kangaroo care. Holding your newborn in direct skin-to-skin contact on your chest ensures physiological and psychological warmth and bonding. Your stable body temperature regulates your baby's temperature, heart and breathing rate, which has been known to help babies to gain weight, sleep deeply and be wakefully content. Your baby will learn to recognise your smell, voice and touch. As your confidence and closeness grow, you may feel ready to integrate massage. Experts recommend gradually introducing strokes when your baby is in a quiet alert state.

There are many classes that offer baby massage courses throughout New Zealand. Ensure your instructor is trained with an accredited organisation.

Along with learning how to safely massage your baby, you will also be taught the oils you can use, ideal times to massage, how to adapt massage techniques as your baby grows, gently stretches, and how to relieve colic, wind and gas - a common ailment with babies.

Massage has been shown to be beneficial for older children too, children with special needs and developmental delays. Foster parents, adoptive parents, and adolescent parents also benefit from massaging their babies.

Baby massage is a technique that every dad should have in his repertoire. Baby massage is easy to learn, and both you and your newborn will love it.

Baby Massage Course in Hawke's Bay - www.hbantenatal-classes.co.nz/postnatalclasses

