RNIB See differently Logo

Date:

Dear XXXXXXX,

# Effective Practice Guide

# Infant massage for a child with vision impairment

## About this guide

This guide explores the use of infant massage to support the development of children with vision impairment.

It draws on the practice and principles of the International Association of Infant Massage (IAIM), a non-profit making organisation whose mission is to *‘promote nurturing touch and communication through training, education and research so that parents, caregivers and children are loved, valued and respected throughout the world community’***.**

Its theory, curriculum and focus are unique and have been carefully developed and refined through research and practical experience since first introduced in 1976.

### Contents

1. What is infant massage?

2. Why use infant massage?

3. Benefits of infant massage

4. Benefits of infant massage for a child with a visual impairment

5. Points to consider during infant massage

## 1. What is infant massage?

Infant massage is an ancient tradition in many cultures throughout the world, which is being re-discovered in the Western world. Research shows that loving, nurturing contact between caregiver and infant has a positive impact on their development. Infant massage is something that every caregiver can do and it provides benefits to both child and carer.

There are a number of organisations that train instructors in infant massage. These qualified instructors then go on to teach the principles of infant massage to parents themselves.

## 2. Why use infant massage?

A cuddle and close contact is a basic human need and the beginning of learning. Visual information informs and helps us interpret much of our sensory experiences, including touch. Touch and tactile exploration may be more challenging and sometimes more difficult for a child with a vision impairment to interpret. A sighted child will hold out their hand. They will see it, see the movement they have made, see the reaction from the adult, see the adult reach for their hand and finally, using their sight, they will see the hands meet. The result is having a hand to hold and making physical contact. This very simple movement leading to touch is reinforced by visual information and the whole process can often be done using vision as the only tool to make contact with another person.

Due to information being lost through decreased vision, babies who have a vision impairment can benefit from more input through senses such as touch, smell and sound and so infant massage routines may be of particular benefit to these children.

## 3. Benefits of infant massage

The International Association of Infant Massage outlines key benefits of infant massage for both the child and parent/s, or caregiver:

### Stimulation

Tactile, nervous system, digestion, circulation, muscle tone, immune system, respiration, communication

### Relaxation

Regulates sleep patterns, breathing, reduces stress, produces calming hormones

### Relief

Colic, sinus, wind, constipation, teething discomfort, poor circulation

### Interaction

Bonding, communication, reading cues, responding to needs

## 4. Benefits of infant massage for a child with a vision impairment

For a child with a vision impairment, infant massage can support tactual sense, body awareness, and the use of hands. Importantly it can help to establish the strong bond of trust between caregiver and child. Many early learning skills require the development of tactual sense. The awareness of our hands and fingers for example, is a vital skill for exploring objects and our environment. The early experience of massage can support a child’s understanding and acceptance of positive touch and be of immense help for other times when you might want to sensitively guide the child's hands for learning and play. Infant massage can enhance your interactions and also support the childs developing sense of kinesthesia (body awareness produced by movement). Massage can also encourage the child’s purposeful movements. For example, transitions from lying to rolling and then to propping up on arms and hands.

During infant massage the following areas might be enhanced:

### Awareness of touch

Infant massage is a non-intrusive touch. It can help a child to become less tactile defensive and reduce hypersensitivity to touch. It is a beneficial way for a young infant to learn about their body and its layout and can also support a child’s tolerance of lying in prone position (on tummy). As a child’s back, front, legs and arms are massaged they will experience tactile feedback about the dimensions of their body, developing an understanding of where their body begins and ends.

### Awareness of the body through movement

Infant massage aids in the development of muscle tone, co-ordination and suppleness. During a massage session, routines such as pedalling legs or bringing feet together heighten the child's awareness of their body and help them to develop a better understanding of how their body is connected from top to bottom, as well as finding these gentle movements pleasurable.

### Identification of body parts

The child’s awareness of their body is developed when body parts are explored in the calm, motivating and relaxing atmosphere that massage offers. It can help to develop awareness of individual body parts, especially if each part of the body is named during massage. For example, which parts of my body are still and which are moving? Where is the pressure on my body from a supporting surface? (the floor, or carer's lap, for example).

### Bonding and communication processes

Bonding has been described as a “unique relationship between two people that is specific and endures through time” or “a dance that builds trust and intimacy”. This close and responsive time you spend with a child during massage supports the child’s overall development, self-esteem and well being, and whilst you and the child are involved in this closely shared experience, it offers a springboard for the child’s early interactions. In this way infant massage can be a communication tool, a two way process. It allows you to observe closely and further understand the child’s signals and cues, further developing your skills to interpret these in a non-distractive environment. It allows time to observe movements, reactions and vocalisations, and enhances the sort of communication that is involved in the earliest stage in turn taking conversations. Close visual proximity helps a child to make use of any vision and gives close odour contact. The child’s focused attention on you also increases the opportunity for eye contact or face to face interaction, which can increase the quality and quantity of the child’s vocalisations.

During infant massage the communication is directly related to the experience and so similar to shared visual attention, such as pointing and looking together, which is also a facilitating factor in early communication with young children.

### Sleep patterns

Some children with very little or no vision experience disturbed sleep patterns. For example, they can confuse night with day. Routine use of infant massage along with other sleep time routines can promote better sleep patterns.

## 5. Points to consider during infant massage

* Always make optimum use of the child’s available vision, move in close to encourage face to face contact.
* Be aware of lighting conditions. Avoid placing the child directly under a strong overhead light which may distract them and will put your facial features into silhouette.
* During massage describe what you are about to do and comment on what you are doing, keeping language simple.
* You may find you will need to break down the massage routine into smaller stages and build slowly. Remember this is a time for mutual pleasure. Cue into the child and go with what is comfortable for both of you.
* Try to start and end the session the same way each time. This will support the child’s understanding of what is about to happen, what is going to happen next, and also develop their understanding of when massage is about to end.
* Above all, enjoy infant massage!

## For further information about RNIB

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) provide a range of services to support children with vision impairment, their families and the professionals who work with them.

RNIB Helpline can refer you to specialists for further advice and guidance relating to your situation. RNIB Helpline can also help you by providing information and advice on a range of topics, such as eye health, the latest products, leisure opportunities, benefits advice and emotional support.

Call the Helpline team on 0303 123 9999 or email RNIB CYPF Mailbox: cypf@rnib.org.uk

Guide updated: July 2020