



A father's touch

Move over mums! After centuries of being sidelined, dads have discovered the joys of bonding with their baby through massage – and they're finding it's a great way to be truly hands-on with their bub. Here's Cathy Netherwood with a touching report.

There's no better way to bond with a baby than through the gentle, soothing ritual of massage. Long used in many traditional societies, and passed down from mother to daughter, it was rediscovered by the western world in the 1980s. But the art of baby massage was considered to be strictly women's business.

Not any longer. With today's fathers increasingly wanting a more active role in the parenting experience, they've found that baby massage is a powerful and positive way to get closer to their babies.

Class action

Glenda Chapman is the president and founding member of the Australian branch of the International Association of Infant Massage (IAIM), a non-profit organisation. She holds classes for parents in the art of massage and also trains other instructors.

Since the program began 15 years ago there have been a few dads along, but in the last five years Glenda has noticed many more men attending class.

"Dads have their own special kind of communication with their babies," she

says. "It's different from a mum's. In class, dads react so wonderfully. They're so in love with their babies, and it's beautiful to see these great big hands gently massaging a tiny bub, and the baby coo-ing back at them! It also gives men special quality time with their babies; after all, they can't breastfeed, can they?"

Two-way street

Research shows that the benefits of infant massage work both ways. A Miami (USA) survey found that when fathers massaged babies their stress levels dropped and they developed increased self-esteem as parents, while the babies greeted them with more eye contact, vocalising and body language.

The focus is so much on mothers as the dominant early parent that many fathers feel sidelined in the first year. They tell themselves that fatherhood only starts for real once the kids are up and running.

Infant massage provides a structured way for dads to have a purpose and place at the baby stage. It provides contact and encourages communication and trust, which lays the foundations for good parent-child relations down the track. Whichever parent is massaging, research consistently shows that it has a powerful and positive

Hands-on dad

Business manager, Campbell Steer, always appreciated the value of massage after a knockabout rugby game. But it wasn't until he had two daughters of his own that he discovered babies felt the same.

"It made sense," he says. "You think of a child's need to be close and receptive to touch, so it should be good for them."

It took practise before Campbell felt comfortable with the technique. "Once I became proficient, it was great. You'd get intimate contact and the baby would respond really well – sometimes they'd fall asleep on

you, or they'd be awake but relaxed. You could tell they really enjoyed it."

In fact, once they started walking, Kiarne and Olivia would come up to Campbell and ask for a massage. Now aged 11 and 6, they're still up for the occasional head rub.

Campbell reckons that massage helps build on a good relationship – and he's not the only one.

"A lot of our friends, from builders to doctors and lawyers, are doing it too," he says. "I analyse and study things and, to me, it's very beneficial for children. It helps to teach them intimacy and enhances awareness of their body. I'm certainly an advocate."

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