



THE POWER OF TOUCH

Having a baby on the neonatal unit can be very frightening and overwhelming. Remember there are a lot of important parenting roles that only you can provide. Never underestimate the power of you, your touch, your smell, your voice, your love. All of these provide the best support for your baby's development.

"Nothing is so healing as the human touch." Bobby Fischer

Touch is our first sensory system to develop in the womb, it affects every area of our life. Our tactile system protects us against danger, it provides us with emotional memory, it helps us feel calm and loved and it helps us explore the world.

Touch promotes an increase in the love hormone oxytocin, which helps us relax, lowers our stress hormone levels, releases feelings of trust and compassion. Touch continues to be important throughout our lifetime.

"We need eight hugs a day, four to survive and eight to thrive." Virginia Satir

Touch Development

- At 7 weeks gestation touch starts to develop.
- At 12 – 15 weeks the fetus is shown to grab the umbilical cord, bring their hands to their face and even suck on their thumb.
- At 20 weeks there are skin receptors in place all over the body.
- At 24 weeks the pain pathways are in place

In the womb, the fetus is covered in lanugo hairs, as the mother walks the fetus experiences a pleasant massage sensation from the amniotic fluid, which is linked to oxytocin release, that helps us with our emotional development. (Bystrova, 2009)



Gentle Touch

A parents loving touch is very important for your baby's brain development. When you come to your baby's bedside, talk softly first, you may need to offer them a finger to hold initially but then gently place your hands on your baby's skin. Watch their response, they may need a moment to adapt.

Touching your baby to start with can be quite scary as their skin may appear fragile and translucent, take your time and remember that warm, slow, still hands are much easier for your baby to adapt to.

Rest your warm hands, gently and quietly breathe and relax. Your baby will recognise your touch, your voice and your smell. This simple act of touch and connection is very powerful and supports your baby's brain development.

Talk to a member of your neonatal team, they will support you and your baby to provide age appropriate touch.

Comforting your baby with touch

During your baby's stay in the neonatal unit, many of the experiences might provide unpleasant touch.

There are several parenting activities that you can do to support your baby during any painful procedures.

Provide gentle, still hands

Skin to skin

Breastfeeding

Let your baby suck on a dummy

let them hold onto a finger

let them push against your hand with their feet

Hold their hands softly towards their middle

Wrap them in a muslin, with their hands free or to their middle

Lying your baby on their side



Skin to Skin

Skin to skin is the act of placing your baby naked apart from a nappy onto your bare chest. Skin to skin is recommended to be carried out for a minimum of one hour but for as long as you and your baby are comfortable.

There is a huge body of evidence to support skin to skin for both the baby and the parents.

Better temperature control

lower risk of infection

shorter stay in hospital

better sleep organisation

decreased pain/stress response

improved lactation

increased parental satisfaction

increased parental confidence

reduced parental stress

improved parental mental health



Your neonatal team will support you and together you will decide when and how your baby will come out for skin to skin.

Neonatal Massage

Neonatal massage is a wonderful evidence based parenting activity that has many benefits for both parents and babies. It provides opportunities for loving, nurturing touch that is so important for brain development. As your baby's developing skin can be fragile, and they may show signs of physiological instability, it is important that you work with your neonatal team and follow their massage guidelines.

Often babies are often ready for massage once they are older than 31 weeks. At Sensory Babies we respect parents' informed choice on massage oil, however we tend to use organic coconut oil.

It is important that your baby is provided with firm, slow, steady strokes, based on your baby's behavioural cues, gestational age and medical status. If your baby appears uncomfortable or is showing signs of instability, stop what you are doing and return to slow, still, resting hands. The occupational therapist on your neonatal unit will be able to support you with this.

Benefits for baby

Fields (2018) completed a research review of the literature and concluded that neonatal massage has huge benefits for both parent and baby.

- Improved temperature stability
- Shorter hospital stay
- Increased weight gain
- Improved neurological development
- Improved muscle tone
- Improvise sleep/wake cycles
- Improved sensory awareness
- Improved circulation
- Decreased pain response



Benefits for parents

- Eases stress about separation
- Provides active parenting role
- Decreases maternal depression
- Increases responsiveness of infant
- Optimise parental infant interaction
- Increases sense of maternal competence

Always talk to your neonatal team, together you will decide if today is a good day for your baby's massage

References: Field T (2018) Infant Massage Therapy Research Review. Clinical Research in Pediatrics, vol 1, issue 2



SENSORY BABIES
Nurture with Knowledge

For more information on sensory development in the neonatal unit and at home, please go to www.sensorybabies.org