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Massaging baby induces bonding

By Jennifer K Mahal
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Itzel Serrano used to hate being put into her car seat. The 5-month-old would fuss and kick when her father, George Serrano, strapped her in.

That was before George and his wife, Aracely, took a class in infant massage offered by the Kids on Track pilot project in the Chula Vista Elementary School District.

“Before, I would pick her up and put her in the car seat, but now I tell her. I show her the car seat. I tell her we're going for a ride,” George said, watching Itzel, his first child, during a class at Harborside Elementary School. “She responds much better.”

Communication and bonding between parent and child is what the five-week class is all about, instructor Elaine Lopez said.

“It's not about the strokes, it's more the bonding and attachment,” said Lopez, who teaches a group of five to seven parents to massage their babies by demonstrating on a doll named Lucy.

Four of the district's 44 elementary schools – Harborside, Montgomery, Lauderbach and Otay – take part in Kids on Track, a First 5 California-funded program meant to help parents understand their child's development and to identify and provide services for children ages 5 and younger with special needs, physical or emotional.

The massage class does not focus on children with special needs. It instead is a proactive way of helping families understand their infants, said Lisa Butler, program manager for Kids on Track.

“How a baby is viewed influences how a baby is cared for,” said Suzanne P. Reese, an international instructor with Infant Massage USA who trained Butler and Lopez.

Infant massage works as a way to create greater understanding between children and adults because it is all about nurturing, she said.

“It's simple and effective and you don't need the electronic tools and gizmos and gadgets,” said Reese, of Ramona, who advocates for infant massage on her Web site, compassionatechild.com. “It's the love from your heart to your hands.”

The class, deliberately kept small, is limited to serving families within the overlapping boundaries of the four schools' neighborhoods: Naples Street to the north, Main Street to the south, Hilltop Drive to the east and Interstate 5 to the west. Much of that area's community is Latino.

Some parents in the current session were approached by *promotoras*, trained outreach workers who screen parents within the community for Kids on Track. Others picked up a flier at day care.

One mother, Nancy Enriquez, said a doctor recommended the program as a way to stimulate muscle tone in her 11-month-old daughter, Valeria Ontiveros.

Studies done by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine show that infant massage can help pre-term babies grow and develop, can help preschoolers behave better and has positive effects on the parent-child relationship.

Enriquez, who brings her 3-year-old son, Gael Ontiveros, with her to the weekly sessions, said learning how to massage Valeria has helped her discover her daughter's likes and dislikes.

"She loves to have her toes rubbed," Enriquez said in Spanish. "She'll put her foot on me and wait very still."

Child care is provided for parents who need to bring older children.

Parents are taught to ask their babies' permission before starting massage. They warm drops of oil in their hands, making a swishing noise that acts as a cue to the baby.

Martha Hernandez said her 5-month-old, Edwin, is antsy before she starts. He calms "the minute I do the massage," she said.

The class cycles through a series of massage strokes with names such as water wheel, open book, sun and moon, and Indian milking. Although Lopez teaches the massage strokes as a series, going from hands and feet to the stomach and the back, she tells the parents to pay attention to what their child wants and follow the little one's lead.

"This is really child-led, it really truly is, because it's all about the baby," said Lopez, a mother of three.

That means if a child needs to eat during class, they eat. If they want their back rubbed instead of their front, so be it.

"Sometimes (Itzel) doesn't want to be massaged," George said. "Sometimes she just wants to play."

No fancy lotions or salves are used. Parents learn that babies can be massaged with 100 percent cold-pressed olive oil.

"They can use what they use in a salad," Butler said, noting that babies often like to suck their fingers and toes. "We want them to be able to do it and not have to buy costly products."

Parents are encouraged to incorporate massage time into their family's lives. Many families add it to their child's bedtime or bathing routines.

Lorena Lopez sets aside time for her 9-month-old, Raul Grajeda, and her 4-year-old, Rene Grajeda. She said doing massage has allowed her to connect with both sons.

"Rene has his time and Raul has his time," Lopez said through an interpreter. "It's important to be able to do this, with our lives being so hectic."

The commitment of the parents coming to the class has impressed the instructors.

"These moms are so dedicated. They have a million things on their plate – cooking, cleaning, taking care of their husbands – but they're taking this hour and a half," instructor Elaine Lopez said.

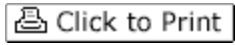
The instructors said during the last session, one mother walked several miles to the class because her car broke down and she didn't want to miss it.

"I think those babies are experiencing a lot of love," Lopez said.

■ Jennifer K Mahal is a San Diego freelance writer.

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