

Therapeutic Massage for Children & Teenagers

by Ingrid Staecker

The healing art of massage is one of the oldest therapies known to man. Massage Therapy has become an important part of the alternative health field. Adults of all ages are seeking massages and bodywork for relaxation, stress reduction, pain relief and flexibility. What is perhaps overlooked is that massage can also benefit the younger generations. Tiffany Field, who established the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami, has shown in research studies with infants that massage greatly contributes to physical and mental development early on. Children also learn about healthy and nurturing touch, which can enhance their body awareness, self-image and confidence.

For many children and adolescents, attending school may be accompanied by increased levels of stress and anxiety, and long hours of sitting, which can lead to chronic posture problems and muscle tension. The young, growing body can experience imbalance in the musculoskeletal system. Some common conditions that emerge are scoliosis, slumped shoulders, headaches, or chronic back and neck pain. Students may also experience sleep problems, lack of concentration and depression.

Therapeutic Massage is one way to help reduce anxiety and promote relaxation in this population. Special massage techniques for children and adolescents are tailored to relieve muscle restrictions and tension, ease pain, and help the body to achieve the functional alignment crucial to their developing musculoskeletal system. In addition, massage is helpful for recovery of muscle soreness and injuries caused by sports activities.

A visit to a massage therapist typically begins with patients filling out a form, which parents then sign to provide their consent. Session length can vary. Teenager sessions are more similar to adults, lasting approximately one hour. First-timers may be able to try a short chair massage, fully dressed, to get an idea of how a light neck



and back massage feels. For younger children, the duration is approximately 30 minutes, plus some “warm-up” time to ensure relaxation. In general, fees are lower than for adults and discount packages for multiple visits are offered by many practitioners.

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Massage sessions for children also differ from adults as the strokes are generally less deep, and it is more “playful” for the younger children, sometimes including games or rhyming. Parents have the option of being present while young children are being massaged. Strokes can be demonstrated on the parent or a doll first. It is key that therapists are flexible and adapt situations to clients comfort levels. Children can decide whether to lie on a table or the floor, stay dressed in light clothes if they feel modest, or request the therapist start strokes in less “critical areas,” such as the neck, feet, or arms. They never have to be naked. If they are fine with partially undressing (which they do alone in the room), they will be covered by sheets during the massage. The therapist either works through the sheets, or uncovers only the area they are massaging. The teen/child indicates what feels most comfortable.

Therapists may also offer reassurance by explaining their massage techniques and talking about muscles and related topics, such as exercise and sports. Youngsters are often interested in learning more. This education during massage can help increase their understanding of how the body works, and ease with their own physicality. The session can become a good “get away,” a place to relax and let go of the stresses of “growing up.” Furthermore, for special needs children and their families, gentle massage can be a helpful adjunct to physical therapy.

Massage therapists can provide suggestions for postural alignment and specific exercises and stretches. Interested parents can learn beneficial techniques and massage strokes for continuing care at home by helping their child into deep relaxation. Books, such as Marybetts Sinclair’s, *Massage for Healthier Children*, and *Pediatric Massage Therapy*, offer further information. In addition to health-promoting qualities, the practice of massage can serve to deepen the bonds with children, offering appropriate touch that conveys and builds a sense of security and trust.

Ingrid Staecker worked for over 15 years as a physical therapist in Germany with children of all ages before beginning her career as a licensed massage therapist in the U.S. She teaches sports massage and assessment at the Connecticut Center for Massage Therapy, and has been a certified infant massage instructor since 2003. For information, contact Ingrid at 203.710.0454, or ingridstaecker@gmail.com.