Infant massage

Therapist: Massaging baby benefits parents and child

By Mary Duffy
Journal Staff Writer

When Sarah Wing gets a massage, her big, blue eyes crinkle at their corners, a smile spreads across her face and a little coo of contentment escapes her mouth.

Sarah's reaction to massage may be typical, but the 3-month-old infant is not a typical massage recipient.

Baby Sarah and her parents, Amy and Joel Wing, are part of the growing infant massage movement. The Wings have been using the technique on their daughter since she was 7 weeks old, and they say it has produced numerous benefits for both her and them.

The Rapid City couple trained with Sherry Oswald, who teaches the Loving Touch Infant Massage technique.

by Shelley Oswald

Infant massage expert, who is a certified infant massage specialist in Rapid City.

Massaging their daughter soothes and calms Sarah, and makes her a happier, more content baby, says Amy, who didn't discover infant massage until after her third child was born. Amy says she taught, cuddled and stroked her older children, 4-year-old Emily and 2-year-old Alex, but what she's learned to do with Sarah goes far beyond the loving, maternal touch she used with her other children.

Joel, too, has noticed a difference between parents with massage and those who don't. On the nights when Amy is at work as an obstetric nurse at Rapid City Regional Hospital, Joel feeds Sarah, a breastfed baby, with a bottle.

Using infant massage as part of her bedtime routine makes the job easier, says Joel, and she already sleeps soundly throughout the night.

"This time, he doesn't call me at work and say, 'What do I do now?'" Amy says.

Amy Wing credits infant massage with helping baby Sarah sleep through the night and comfort herself.

The gentle touch may help prevent the physical abuse of children that she sees in her work. "I believe that hands that have massaged a baby are much less likely to abuse that baby," she says.

Oswald teaches parents the massage techniques in four separate weekly sessions of an hour each and charges $75 for all four sessions. She starts with the lower body, using leg and foot massage that babies tend to love.

Another session focuses on tummy massage, using techniques that are particularly helpful for babies with gas, colic or colitis.

Oswald says, "With babies, their tension tends to center in their abdomen." Strokes with names such as Water Wheel, Hands of a Clock, Moon Walking and perhaps most important, the Knee to Tummy Push, are all abdominal strokes that aid in digestion and elimination. The "I Love You" stroke, which Oswald describes as tracing the letters "I," an inverted "L" and an upside-down "U" on a baby's abdomen, is a "good maintenance stroke for the tummy."

She suggests using almond oil when massaging an infant, but doesn't recommend using baby oil. Almond oil is the lubricant least likely to irritate a baby's skin, but lanolized oil is just fine, too, she says. Oils should not be used on the face, however.

Infant massage is especially good for babies and children with special needs, says Oswald, such as premature babies or those born with medical conditions that might preclude frequent touch. While she isn't trained to massage such babies, she'd like to see the medical profession endorse the benefits of massage for them.

All physiological systems are stimulated by massage, especially the neurological system, she says. Massage helps increase oxygen and nutrient flow to cells, deepens respiration, improves muscle tone and blood circulation, aids digestion and improves sensory awareness.

"My vision is that every baby will have the opportunity to be massaged," Oswald says.

Research confirms that the person giving an infant massage benefits, too. A study at the Touch Research Institute of Miami researchers compared the effects on lap-sitting volunteers after giving infants massages for a month versus those whose grandparents held them for a month. The people who gave massages reported less anxiety, fewer depressive symptoms, higher pulse rate, more self-esteem, fewer doctor visits and more social contacts.

"Doing infant massage can help me as a parent relax, as well, and I can give that calmness to my baby," says Oswald.

Amy agrees. "I'd have 10 more if I could keep them this way."

After six weeks, Sarah is a massage veteran who already knows what she likes.

"She really likes her tummy massaged, and she loves having her feet, toes and hands massaged," says her mother.

Sarah gets a whole body massage after her bath or at bedtime, which is a special time Amy has come to treasure with her daughter.

"With three little kids around, it's a nice one-on-one time with the new baby," she says.