

Children Massaging Children

A Research Project.

By Jill Morgan Dip PE, Dip Tch, ND, RMT

Jill Morgan asks the question: "Does massage have a positive effect on a child's self-perception?" Following on from her literary review in our last issue focusing on improving a Child's self-perception through massage, Jill now summarises a small-scale research program she conducted in Hawkes's Bay, New Zealand.

In the late 1990s Eva Scherer, a massage therapist in Auckland, established Child Connection, a non profit organisation that promotes the programme Children Massaging Children (CMC)

In 2002 Eva successfully introduced the programme to Marlborough Primary School (Auckland) and received a mayoral award for her work. She has also run the programme in YMCA programmes and what was the Pakuranga health camp.

Last year at the New Zealand Therapeutic Massage Association (TMA) annual conference she shared with me her desire to strengthen this program with research. Having conducted some massage and relaxation sessions at my children's school (Ebbett Park) several years earlier, I was already keen to undertake research in this area and, as I had just completed a literature review on the effects of massage on children, this meeting was timely indeed.

A literature review of the benefits of massage with children has shown improved general mental, emotional and physical health after a massage programme (Morgan 2006) This is frequently measured by

- Less playground violence
- quieter and more responsive children in the classroom
- and the development of enhanced social skills

No New Zealand studies in massage therapy have used a control group in their research.

MESSAGE IN SCHOOLS PROJECT

When undertaking this project, I began with the question "Does massage have a positive effect on a Child's self perception?" From this series of "domains" or aspects of a child's life was identified. These are components of a child's self perception. The aims of the project were to determine if there were changes in each child's self perception.

The domains selected were:

- a. Physical appearance
- b. Physical ability
- c. Peer relations
- d. Relationship with mother
- e. Relationship with father
- f. Reading
- g. Mathematics
- h. Learning
- i. School work.
- j. Global self esteem

The assessment tool used was the Burnett Self-Scale (<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/26822/1/c26822.pdf>), which measured the child's feelings about each of the above domains using a 1 to 5 scale. For New Entrants and Year Ones in the school the scale was modified to a 3 point range.

Method

The 15 week massage programme was implemented at Ebbett Park and, in order to provide some indication of the self perception changes a pupil might normally undergo, a second school, Camberley, was chosen to complete only the self perception testing without the massage programme. Both schools are both situated in Hastings, New Zealand. The two schools have the same decile rating of 1 based on a 1 - 10 scale; they draw the highest proportion of their students from a low socioeconomic community.

Eva Scherer taught the CMC programme to all teachers at Ebbett Park as a professional development workshop. Information on how touch deprivation can affect mental capacity and performance at school was discussed. This was followed by the teachers experiencing for themselves the massage techniques used in the programme.

Every student in each school, aged 5 - 11 years (approx 148 at Ebbett Park and 123 at Camberley), was invited to participate in the programme - with parental consent, of course. Each pupil also had the option each day of choosing to participate or not.

The children were taught to massage and touch each other's back head and hands while listening to catchy songs professionally put together for the CMC programme. Sessions lasted for approximately 15 - 20 minutes and took place at least 3 times per week. The child performing the massage asked permission of the child to be massaged prior to the beginning of each massage. Each child could massage a child of the same or opposite sex, as long as permission was sought.

All the children in both schools completed brief self-reporting questionnaires measuring attitudes towards themselves in social, academic and personal contexts. This was conducted prior to the massage programme beginning and at the conclusion of the 15 weeks; completion of the questionnaires took approximately 20 minutes. For those too young to read, the questions were read out, and visual aids (smiley/sad faces) were used to assist with completing the survey.

Children completed the questionnaire in their own classroom sitting apart from other children. I coordinated this process with the assistance of any available teacher or teacher's aid.

Results

1 Ebbett Park

The children in the massage programme at Ebbett Park demonstrated five significant improvements, three of which were in the relationship domain. The older children demonstrated a significant improvement in their perception of their physical ability. This is an interesting result; perhaps it can be partly explained by fact that, having touched and massaged others, they feel better about being able to take part in other activities such as sport, games and activities

There was also a strong improvement in the "school work" subscale, suggesting that the children may have been more settled in their work time and therefore better able to concentrate and produce work of a high quality. Teachers reported using message sessions to calm the children prior to work that required concentration. Another comment from a teacher was that in the busy lives of the children (and teacher) a time just to "be" and enjoy the massage time was important.

For both the younger and older children the "relationship with father" self-concept subscale produced significant improvements. The possible reasons for this could be that the family atmosphere at home may have changed due to a calmer child and/or the child massaging the father or mother at home thereby resulting in a calmer household. Children did report going home and massaging their parents, showing them what they had learned at school..

Finally the younger children showed a significantly strong improvement in their relationship with their peers ("peer relations" subscale). The teachers of these two classes ran the massage sessions almost daily. The sessions were very popular and children were encouraged to exchange with class members throughout the 15 weeks. It is perhaps not surprising that there was an improvement in peer relations.

2 Camberley

Camberley, the control school also recorded some statistically significant results.

The older children showed an improved perception of their physical appearance. There are a number of possible reasons for these results. Camberley conducts a large number of programmes throughout the year; winter sports, cultural involvement, "growing pains" (social skills) and anti-bullying strategies. Any or all of these may have contributed to the improvement.

Another significant change was observed in an improved relationship with mother. This could be attributed to the large community involvement in tabloid sports and parent interviews, both of which were run in August prior to running of second questionnaire. It was mainly mothers who attended both of these events.

For the younger children (new entrants and year one) who completed an abbreviated version of the questionnaire, significant improvements in self-perception surrounding maths, learning self-concept scale and global self-esteem were evident. "NUMI", a maths numeracy programme running throughout the school, could have played a part in this result; their improvement in maths may have boosted their confidence which in turn may have impacted on their improved perception of this subject.

Improved learning, self-concept and global self-esteem could be due to the children being more comfortable in the school setting and experiencing successes with their learning.

Teachers feedback

The teachers at Ebbett Park were asked to complete a questionnaire following the completion of the study. The questionnaire asked for feedback on aspects of the programme.

Four of the six classes implemented at least 15 - 20 minutes of massage three times a week. In all classes there was time for the children to both give and receive a massage. Some children stayed with the same partner while others did not. Teachers encouraged children to mix with different children. The majority of children loved the sessions and would request them.

Session times varied and were fitted into the programme for the day: after play or lunch, or often when teachers wanted the children to have "quiet" time. Teachers noted that the children were calm, very quiet and reserved and ready to listen and work. If used at the end of the day "it almost sent them to sleep". What a wonderful way to send a child home after a busy day at school!

Teachers were generally happy with the programme format and some indicated they would continue with the massage on a regular basis.

Final comments

These results showed significant improvements in children's relationships with others. If children have improved relationships with those around them, then perhaps the base for future relationships will be strengthened.

Schools are always searching for ways to improve methods of delivery by making learning fun, interactive and valuable. Our nation is also continually searching for ways to develop healthy relationships in society.

This study supports other research undertaken in this field overseas and certainly highlights the need to undertake more research in New Zealand schools. It also goes some way to arguing for the inclusion of a massage in schools programme embedded within the Health (Hauora) and Physical Education curriculum.

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References

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