

Touch therapy for tiny tots

A massage programme is making its gentle mark in youth programmes and classrooms, writes Karen Kotze

Eva Scherer has made a career out of a touchy subject.

But the massage therapist is determined to promote the benefits of a massage programme for children which she believes can help curb aggression and a range of other ills in later life.

"Our children are touch-deprived, and it shows," Eva says. "It shows in their growing obesity, their aggression, their depression — their suicide."

Eva's answer is a peer message programme for children which she has introduced to several youth programmes and one primary school.

Her "child connection" technique for schools or playgroups teaches children to massage each other, with only supervision by adults.

Peer massage is par for the course for children in Sweden and Poland, and supporters say it can contribute to lower depression and suicide rates.

Eva was working at the Pakuranga Health Camp for Children in 1988 when she decided to introduce the idea to New Zealand.

Her interest took her to the University of Miami's Touch Research Institute where she learned the techniques to put together her own programme.

Tailoring it to New Zealand children has seen her approach Arif Usmani from Auckland entertainers The Auntyies to come up with tunes and lyrics to complement the massage movements.

For the classes, children are put into pairs, and learn simple massage techniques for hands, backs and heads. All massages are done fully clothed.

"We only need to teach the children the



PHOTO: BRADLEY AMBROSE

• Eva Scherer and Natasha Daily tutor touch therapy in schools and playgroups

techniques and supervise to ensure they grasp the context and intention," Eva says. "Sometimes we have to correct aggressive touch, when children really thump each others' backs instead of patting."

Eva says for many children touch has been taboo and they simply need to learn how to reach out, and receive positively.

She says parents are so worried that their touches will be misinterpreted in a society which is riddled with sexual dangers for children that they simply stop touching their children altogether.

Boys are of particular concern, being more

at risk of developing severe touch-deprivation in sole societies.

Eva says many behavioural outbursts are unconscious manipulations by boys who are willing to accept rough handling or hidings rather than no physical contact at all.

"A simple back rub or stroking the arms, legs or feet can do unspoken wonders for the parent-child connection," she says. "It teaches positive touch and just lets the children feel loved. It's just as good for the parent, or person giving the massage."

Eva's massage programme is part of Mount Albert's YMCA holiday programme, has been

used at the Pakuranga Health Camp, and is part of the normal school day at Marlborough Primary School on the North Shore.

Eva was awarded a North Shore mayoral community award for excellence last year after the successful Marlborough pilot programme.

Marlborough principal Christine Wargent says her children love the massage exercises. "It is really sad that all schools haven't taken it on board ... it is so easy, and it works, for teachers and kids. Once they've had their massage, the class is quiet and receptive to study, and everyone feels good."

Effects of massage therapy

The University of Miami's Touch Research Institute says massage therapy:

- Facilitates weight gain in pre-term infants.
- Reduces stress hormones and boosts serotonin levels (feel-good endorphins).
- Alleviates depressive symptoms.
- Reduces pain.
- Improves immune function.