

Soft touch

Elizabeth Calderara provides some simple reflexology and massage techniques that parents can use to help calm their child

Reflexology and massage are great ways of harnessing the calming power of touch to improve physical comfort and wellbeing. In this article, I will explain how to use these mediums to help your child become less anxious, to fall asleep, and to relieve the discomfort of cramping in muscles or reflux. I will provide a few simple movements that can be shared with the family at home or in school by key workers and health professionals.

A simple routine of gentle strokes and pressure techniques can take less than ten minutes. It can help to induce a sense of relaxation – easing muscle tension, calming anxiety, balancing disturbed sleep patterns and improving digestive issues such as constipation.

So how does this occur?

Have you ever stubbed a toe, bashed your elbow or stood on a sharp object in your bare feet? I'll wager the first thing you do is to rub the area to ease the pain. We adopt this natural response because throughout history we have used our hands to impart comfort and healing.

Our feet and hands together have over half the bones in the body, with a sensitive network of nerves, tendons and muscles. Reflexology is the application of pressure and movement of the thumbs and fingers over the feet and/or hands on points which correspond to specific areas of the body.

Skin is the largest sensitive organ of the body. In the developing embryo it arises from the same cell layer as the nervous system. The skin not only reflects how well we are by its colour, texture and temperature, but also our emotional health. It mirrors our feelings; we blanch when fearful and nervous, and flush with embarrassment, excitement or anger. Massage is a messenger to the body's internal organs via the skin.

Reflexology for SEN

Soothing sequences of massage and reflexology for children with SEN should be carried out wherever your child is most comfortable, at a time that is right for them. The child can be in a wheelchair, sitting on the floor, seated on your lap or on cushions. If your child

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is hypersensitive or tactile defensive, has sight or hearing challenges or medical issues, the sequence can be adapted, extended or reduced. The hands can be used to give reflexology if the feet are too sensitive or if gaiters and/or shoes can't be removed easily.

You would not give a treatment to a child if they feel unwell, have a temperature, infection, open wound, bruise or cut, if they are recovering from surgery or if they have been vaccinated recently or are experiencing reactions to vaccinations. Reflexology should also not take place over the site of verrucae or athlete's foot.

Most points on the feet and hands are worked with the fingertips and the edge of thumb. The following is a simple technique that parents/carers can use with their children. You will be using a particular technique known as "thumb walking". This is a movement which mimics the movement of a caterpillar. It is carried out by flexing the thumb at the first joint whilst simultaneously sliding it forward. The thumb never leaves the skin but the pressure fluctuates as it moves.

Each foot is divided into three horizontal sections corresponding to areas of the body: first the diaphragm line below the large pad of the toes, second the waist line where the foot begins to narrow, and third the pelvic area at the beginning of the heel. There are a further five vertical zones. Using these as markers, the body can be mapped out on each foot, with the right foot linking to the right side of the body and left foot to the left side.



Reflexology can be carried out in positions that suit the child.

Thumb walking is a movement which mimics the movement of a caterpillar

Whether you are giving a reflexology or massage treatment or a mixture of both, be comfortable and care for your back; make sure it is supported. It is important you practice this routine to be sure you do not put undue stress on your hand and arm. Practise on your own arms or hands.

How to practice thumb walking

1. Take a pen and colour the end of your thumb at the top of the pad.
2. Place your right thumb on your left arm, or vice versa.
3. Release the thumb joint slightly so that it creeps ever so slightly forward. If you can see the pen mark on your thumb pad, you are over flexing the thumb joint.
4. Repeat the above using slow and steady movements; tiny incremental movements are key to prevent straining of your thumb, wrist tendons and lower arm muscles. The same procedure can be used with your forefinger, if this is more comfortable for you,



The hands can be used to give reflexology if feet are too sensitive or inaccessible.

Relaxation routine

For children and teenagers aged four to 18 years

A cream or non-perfumed talcum powder can be used to help the flow of movement.

1. Placement: one hand underneath the heel, with the opposite hand placed just half way down the shin bone. Stroke with a gentle but firm movement down and over the top of the foot and toes. Do this several times and repeat on the other leg and foot.
2. Placement: first four fingers of both hands on either side of the ankle. Circle the ankle bones with the first four fingers of each hand several times very gently.
3. Placement: holding the heel of the foot, follow your eye down from between toes two and three, just below the diaphragm line. Gently press the solar plexus point, release, press and release press and release.
4. Placement: support the foot with one hand. With the other hand place your four fingers gently over the top of the foot. With the thumb, caterpillar walk up the foot, to the large toe first, cover the whole foot by working from the heel to the top of each toe. Complete and then change to the other foot.
5. Placement: support the foot with one hand on the heel. Glide the thumb of the opposite hand across the foot from the side which has the great toe to the little toe. Glide across until the whole foot is covered. Then repeat the action on the other foot.
6. Complete the treatment with the stroking technique of point number 1.

and this is also a gentle alternative for treatment of babies and young children.

Once you are confident with the thumb/finger walking, you are ready to start a treatment. Before beginning, introduce the concept of reflexology and/or massage. **SEN**

Massage routine

These movements tone the intestinal system and help with digestion, relieving colic, gas and constipation (which is helpful for babies and young children).

1. Water wheel 1: use paddling movements on the child's tummy, one hand following the other, as if you were scooping sand toward yourself.
2. Water wheel 2 (with legs up): hold up your child's legs with one hand; grasp the ankles and repeat paddling motion on the child's tummy (as above). This relaxes the stomach and allows deeper massaging.

Further information

Elizabeth Calderara is a complementary practitioner with 19 years experience of working with children and young people with special and complex needs: www.fabulous-feet.co.uk