

# Teach them Well

## Massage in Schools Program

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*In October 2009, Anne Elston pioneered massage into six of the primary school classes at Huonville Primary School in Tasmania. With over 30 years experience as a primary school teacher in the UK and Australia and as a trained instructor for the Massage in Schools Program (MISP), Anne advocates her strong beliefs in the value of massage within the school setting. 2010 sees the further expansion of the program into other schools in Tasmania, with Collinsvale Primary School set to introduce the Program to all their classes in first term.*

Touch is the first sense to develop in humans. It is essential to our health and well-being. Children who learn healthy views of touch, and who are provided with positive tactile experience by their caregivers, are more likely to grow up to be adults with healthy self-esteem, a sense of boundaries and long-lasting intimate relationships.

While teaching in the UK, I heard about the Massage in Schools Program (MISP) through The Centre for Child Mental Health in London. I read about the benefits of using massage with children and decided it sounded like another way of working with children who had learning and/or behaviour difficulties.

In 2003 I became an instructor and immediately implemented the program in my own classroom - a nurture class of 10 and 11 year olds all with significant learning and behaviour problems. I went on to use the program in two other classes with 3-5 year olds.

Results were dramatic. I continued to use the MISP daily for almost 2 years and the outstanding effect on my class made me determined to take the next step and become a trainer. As my planned move to Australia was already underway and there were no MISP trainers in Australia, it seemed even more important that I should gain this qualification.

In 2005, I undertook seven days of training in London to become an International Massage in Schools Trainer. This meant I could now train adults to be Massage in Schools Instructors. This is my only massage training – I am, first and foremost, a teacher.

I migrated to Western Australia in 2005 and moved from there to Tasmania at the end of 2008. I have implemented the program in all these settings. This is not too difficult a process – I firstly discuss the program with the principal and staff and give them information in a leaflet and through the website. So far, every principal has agreed to let me use the program and they have agreed to come in and observe after the first few sessions. Without exception, everyone who observes a class of children performing massage is ‘blown away’ by it!

I have seen first hand that massage is for all children, and can benefit all children. If nothing else, it has been a consistently calm, peaceful and soothing part of our day – usually, but not always performed first thing in the morning. The response from parents has been very positive – the majority of children take the ‘strokes’ home to practice on their parents.

On receiving the initial information, a minority of parents will ask that their child be allowed to choose *not* to take part in the massage program. In my experience, within the first three sessions, every child who had elected to merely watch has been happy to join in the program.

Children learn the routine quickly and accept the need to respect their partner by asking permission before beginning, and by checking out that they are doing it right for that particular partner. Sometimes the least popular or least able child is a star when it comes to massage time – this is brilliant for their self-esteem.

In the UK, where massage is used in large numbers of schools, it is recognised as an effective tool for developing children's social and emotional health. Schools are regularly formally inspected to ensure quality teaching and learning are taking place. Where massage is part of the school day it is invariably mentioned as a very positive way for schools to meet the needs of the 'whole child.'

In Sweden, massage is a common practice in grade schools and preschools. Kerstin Uvnæs-Moberg, from the Karolinska Institute, and Professor Annelise von Knorring from the Psychiatric Clinic for Children in Uppsala, together with the Axelsons Gymnastiska Institute conducted a study involving massage therapy and 150 preschool children. Among other things, this study clearly showed that with massage therapy, levels of aggression, anxiety and stress were lowered in children. Children functioned better in groups and psychosomatic illnesses were fewer (Elmstrom 2003).

The Axelsons Gymnastiska Institute could see the importance of massage with children and with consultation with the Touch Research Institute, 'Massage at Preschools and Schools' was implemented. Over 8,000 teachers throughout Sweden were trained over a five year period. The program reported great differences within. Observations showed:

- children became calmer and less aggressive
  - they could concentrate more easily
  - children developed more empathy
  - and the children demonstrated the ability to say 'no' to unwanted physical contact.
- (Elmstrom 2003)

Perhaps the most important aspect for children in school is that they learn to give to someone else, and have to make an effort to do a good job for the other person – even if they don't really feel like it that day. This is a personal/social skill that is very difficult to teach in other ways. Children have to think of the needs of someone else and they need to do the routine really well to have the same done for them in return.

Children are keen to talk about their experience of massage and how they got on with their partner. They use language to try and describe feelings they would not usually use – soft, lovely, calm, smooth, gentle to name a few.

## **Massage and Childhood Stress**

I have spent much time over the years trying to find out more about the difficulties faced by many children in the school setting.

Researcher Maria Hernandez-Reif, Ph.D. says "Massage is a wonderful stress-buster for children. Oftentimes when we think about stress, we think it's just an adult condition, only adults have stress but if you think about it, even young infants and children are prone to stress." (Vanderbilt, 2003)

Children can experience stress as a result of starting school because in most cases they are not familiar with the area or the children in their class. Family illness, financial problems and divorce can produce emotional stress.

One of the consistent findings of studies into massage therapy is that it is a means of reducing stress and stress hormone levels. Studies show there is a relationship between stress and the immune system. If stress hormones are chronically elevated, cortisol will destroy the healthy immune cells that fight viruses. Reducing stress and stress hormones in the body, allows the immune system to bounce back and function in a healthy manner. This, in turn, heals the body and maintains homeostasis (Vanderbilt, 2003).

Anxiety, phobias, depression, social withdrawal and problematic peer relationships can all be a result of stress in the classroom.

The school years play a very important role in a child's life, providing constant interaction with peers, adults and, particularly, teachers. Children rehearse social roles at school. School is where children learn and develop communication and social skills.

Increasing numbers of Australian children are experiencing important changes in their family lives, often through parental separation and divorce. Parental divorce or separation is not only a source of insecurity but also a source of unhappiness for young children.

According to Amanda Wade and Carol Smart, co authors of 'How primary school children cope with family change', statistics show that more than 70% of children experiencing parental divorce are under the age of 10. Young children deal with their emotional difficulties in a number of ways including:

- distracting themselves – by playing
- escaping - by sleeping
- displaying anger and distress (Wade & Smart, 2002)

## **The Expectation to Achieve**

The school system in developed countries – particularly the UK, USA and Australia is geared to children achieving at an average or above average level of attainment. The curricula is 'delivered' to children who are expected to learn and retain at the age and stage prescribed by the education system.

Testing – SATS, NAPLAN etc. - is undertaken at a young age and children who may only be late developers are often seen as failures. If the child is unable to achieve at the specified time, work is rarely repeated. Key concepts can be completely missed by children and the gap between the struggling student and his or her peers becomes wider.

Very often, children who cannot understand their work cannot carry out work without extra help, cannot make sense of the words on the paper and will display their frustration through challenging behaviour. The child may then become labelled as a 'low achiever' and a troublemaker. The child enters a negative cycle from which it is very difficult to escape.

Such children are common in all societies where we expect every child to be at least averagely academic. Children's self-esteem suffers, they don't like coming to school and they believe they cannot do things. And so the negative and increasingly destructive cycle continues.

My belief in the benefits of using massage with children is based on my long experience of working with children and my observations of how many children and parents struggle in today's society.

My many years of work with parents (particularly, but not only, those who are socially and economically disadvantaged) have shown me that many families are unable to meet all the emotional needs of their children. The focus of giving children 'things' rather than time and attention seems to be producing larger numbers of children who don't often have calm and balance in their lives.

I finished training to be a primary school teacher way back in 1979 in Manchester. After one term of teaching I worked with teenagers in Social Services for the next 10 years. This was an intense and often very stressful job – dealing with young offenders at risk of custody/further custody and also working with their whole family. I went on to teach children in Plymouth for the next 12 years. I taught across the primary range – from 3 to 11 year olds and I began to specialise in working with children who had learning and/or behaviour difficulties.

I also worked with parents throughout my 12 years in Plymouth schools. The two schools I chose to work in were in one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas of the UK. During my last 5 years in the UK, I worked as the Special Needs Co-ordinator/part-time Nurture Class Teacher and Family Projects Worker.

I went on numerous courses related to this as I tried everything to find ways to help these children learn more easily. School was a very negative experience for so many of them and I wanted to try and change this. I completed a Master of Arts in Education (Special Needs/Inclusive Education) in 2003.

In Australia I have worked in remote and country schools in WA, in a private Anglican School and in a high school Education Support Centre.

## Children with Special Needs

During the last six years I have used the Massage in Schools Program with children from 4 - 12 years in a number of different settings. Firstly, with a class of Grade 6 children who all had additional needs including:

- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADHD
- intellectual disability
- and challenging behaviour

and then with 3, 4 and 5 year olds.

Children who have additional educational needs can especially benefit from daily massage sessions.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) children find out what 'calm' feels like, and their concentration span increases for a significant period immediately after massage – but it doesn't last all day! They and children on the autism spectrum can benefit greatly from working with their peers. Such children are often outsiders within the classroom and positive peer work in massage can include them more in the class group.

Many of the children who have challenging behaviour – including those above – have a peaceful, calm and purposeful period of time every day because they have taken part in massage. They are alert and quieter than usual and are able to settle to a session of purposeful (focused) listening and learning.

As the teacher, I choose '*pairings*'. This is an area where 'social engineering' can be used if needed. Children who are antagonistic towards each other may be paired to help them build more positive interactions. The isolated child can be carefully included; the aggressive or loud child can be paired to minimise disruption. There are so many options here... the results of careful, sensitive and creative pairing can be more harmony and co-operation between children outside of massage.

Perhaps the most powerful result at the end of daily massage is the calm and alert atmosphere in the classroom – and this can happen with 25, 50 or even 100 children who have finished a massage session. And, yes, four classes working happily together is achievable. The children are relaxed but ready to listen, concentrate, work well and co-operate.

It may be that this is the first time an ADHD child experiences what 'calm' feels like and the child knows he or she can find the feeling again.

It is a time for children with poor concentration and challenging behaviour to find out they can listen and settle to their work. It is a time for younger and older children to work together – as buddies; for younger children become the teachers for older students; for same age classes to get to know and learn from each other.

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne describes ADHD as a developmental problem that '...results in poor concentration and control of impulses. It can affect children's learning and social skills and also family functioning. It is not an illness. With medical treatment, understanding and care, a child with ADHD can live a normal life. It is much more common in boys than girls.' (Royal Children Hospital, Melbourne, 2003)

Australian statistics reveal that between 3% and 5% of Australian primary school children are affected by ADHD. Approximately one in every hundred Australian children is presently taking drugs to manage the symptoms of the condition. Australia has about 50,000 children taking stimulants for ADHD, which makes it (per capita) the third highest consumer in the world after the United States and Canada (Howard Florey Institute, 2007).

When discussing treatment for ADHD, the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne outlines behaviour strategies to assist children in dealing with the condition. These include home and classroom strategies such as:

- keeping structure
- boosting self-esteem
- and building social skills

In a study called 'Massage therapy improves mood and behaviour of students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder', by the Touch Research Institutes, USA, 30 students between the ages of 7 and 18 years diagnosed with ADHD were randomly assigned to a massage group or a wait-list control group.

The massage group received massage therapy for 20 minutes twice weekly over the course of one month. The results revealed that massage therapy benefited students with ADHD by improving short-term mood state and longer-term classroom behaviour.

The Touch Research Institutes reported that regular massage therapy can be an effective treatment for children with ADHD. A study found adolescent boys who received ten 15-minute daily massages were observed by their teachers to be more focused in their schoolwork and to fidget less. In addition, the children rated themselves as happier than those who participated in a relaxation therapy program (Khilnani, et al, 2003).

A key issue in the controversial nature of ADHD is the range of symptoms and behaviour underlying the condition. Current knowledge indicates that it is rarely simple and there are likely to be several causes of ADHD.

For example, a report by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) argued that evidence suggests that many factors, including genetic, neurophysiologic, cognitive, familial and environmental factors are involved. The relative importance of these factors is yet to be established by research. The NHMRC concludes from the available evidence that it is likely that a variety of contributing factors may operate in a vulnerable child to result in the behaviours of ADHD (Buckmaster 2004).

In conjunction with other therapies (e.g. drug therapies and/or behaviour modification), massage therapy could become an important tool in the management of ADHD. In cases where current therapies are not effective or are accompanied by undesirable side effects,

massage therapy could be an effective substitute treatment for children diagnosed with ADHD (Buckmaster 2004).

Using positive and nurturing touch daily in the classroom has far-reaching effects. The release of positive hormones and transmitters through massage allows children to find balance within themselves. If they are stressed or over stimulated the release of oxytocin through massage reduces the levels of cortisol in the bloodstream much more quickly than would otherwise occur. We are giving children an awareness of how their body works, how they can temperate their mood in a positive way. This is a skill for life – to take into adulthood and to give to other people.

### **Massage and Bullying**

There is much evidence to show that classrooms using massage are calmer and that schools using massage have reduced incidences of bullying.

Although the evidence is mainly based on observations, it has been seen as a factor in so many schools in the UK and Australia, Massage in Schools is now a partner in the Anti-Bullying organisations of both countries. Massage is being used to bring children closer together. It is an activity that has helped bridge the gap between the children either having *no* physical contact with each other *or* bullying one another.

Bullying is defined by the National Centre Against Bullying as ‘when someone (or a group of people) with more power than you, repeatedly and intentionally uses negative words and/or actions against you, which causes you distress and risks your wellbeing’ (Cross et al. 2009).

Bullying is a problem that no child should have to put up with but, in Australia, statistics revealed by the National Centre Against Bullying, show that bullying is a serious problem. In Australian schools, bullying affects approximately one student in every four (Cross et al. 2009).

Dr Jean Healey, an educational psychologist at the University of Western Sydney, has released the results of a 10-year study into bullying. The study demonstrates that bullying in the playground can result in the same level of psychological damage as that produced by child abuse (McKewen, 2008).

Although the common outcome of massage in schools is certainly reduced bullying, MISP is not an anti-bullying program as such. It's a program designed to provide opportunities for children to experience positive and healthy touch, which in turn promotes healthy relationships, calms children and promotes optimum conditions for learning.

### **Massage and the School Curriculum**

As part of the Government's action plan for values, respect and behaviour in schools, a number of school education initiatives exist to promote the key community values of respect and responsibility.

Nerida Matthews, the Curriculum Manager for Health and Physical Education from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, explains that although the curriculum varies slightly from state to state and the terminology and language differs, all states have Health and Physical Education as part of the primary school curriculum (Matthews, personal communication, November 10, 2009).

The Massage in Schools Program meets many outcomes within the school health and wellbeing curriculum in every state of Australia, reinforced by the guidance and materials from the Federal Government's Department of Education, Science and Training.

Lauren Harkins, a primary school teacher in the south-west of Sydney and a MISP Instructor, says "Apart from addressing many parts of the PDHPE curriculum including interpersonal relationships and child protection, I find massage makes a big difference in a number of different ways. I find that class management becomes much easier with the use of massage and a range of benefits are provided for all students."

Part of the school curriculum deals with interpersonal relationships. Lauren says, "This is concerned with developing an understanding of the nature of relationships and developing skills for building positive relationships. Massage addresses this strand through helping students develop skills to build and fortify relationships with class mates and a strategy to use outside the classroom as well. The massage sequence is a strategy students choose to use to rebuild relationships with friends after a 'fight' or disagreement on the playground or in the classroom. By using massage in the classroom you can see a difference in the way students relate to each other and a difference in the way they deal with issues among class mates."

There is recognition of the importance of developing children's social, emotional, personal and health skills and awareness –in the broadest sense - across each state's curriculum.

Although the name of the subject area is slightly different depending on the state, the required outcomes are the same. The Massage in Schools Programme broadly addresses curriculum outcomes for personal, social, emotional and health education with:

- its development of positive communication,
- its inclusive nature
- and its ethos of respect for self.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a direct result of the implementation of the Massage in Schools Program I have seen:

- children learn to respect themselves and the needs and feelings of others
- improvement in a child's mental and emotional health
- an increase in a child's self esteem and confidence
- developing awareness of what good and bad touch are
- children learning to co-operate with others
- an acceptance of differences
- children learning to think of others before themselves

- children feeling included and part of their class group
- improved motor skills, especially in children with ADHD
- recognised calmness and alertness in themselves
- improved concentration in class
- a development of greater empathy for each other.

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