

2015 PLAY YOUR PART AWARDS FOR INSPIRING PREVENTION INITIATIVES SOUTH AUSTRALIA

To: Relationships Australia South Australia

For: Infant Massage Program

Relationships Australia South Australia's (RASA) Infant Massage Program develops the skills of parents to respond sensitively and appropriately to their babies.

Parents are taught how to have a "conversation" with their baby using healthy touch: how to use and adapt different massage strokes and routines for unsettled babies, incorporating eye-contact, facial expressions and voice into their interactions. The program is offered as a fun activity that supports and empowers parents to understand their baby's unique cues and individual needs and adjust their interactions in response.

Designed for parents with a newborn (0-12 months), the program involves individual sessions and/or five once-a-week group sessions, shared between four to five families, supported by a trained instructor.

The first year of a child's life presents a multitude of challenges for parents, including the ability to 'tune in' to their newborn. Being 'tuned in' is the means by which parents communicate with their baby.

This interaction is crucial for laying the foundation for the infant's present and future physical, mental and social wellbeing. Difficulty tuning in increases the risk for suboptimal wellbeing outcomes across the child's life span.

Incorporating the International Association of Infant Massage's First Touch™ Program, RASA's Infant Massage Program is an evidence-supported intervention for both healthy and at risk groups which protects, restores and enhances 'attunement'.

According to Deborah Lockwood, Manager of Child and Youth Services, (RASA), the parenting behaviours supported are those believed to be crucial to the optimal functioning, development and regulation of an infant's Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) Axis. The HPA-axis plays a critical role in brain development during the first year of life and is associated with long-term mental health, social behaviour, and also the expression of certain genes associated with serious mental illness and addiction.

The program is delivered across the Adelaide metropolitan area as well as in two communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjara (APY) lands and has contributed to an increase in the wellbeing of mothers and their infants.

By the end of the First Touch™ Program, many mothers had begun to articulate their baby's point of view more clearly and their confidence also appeared to influence infant wellbeing. This protects infants from some effects of, for example, parental stress, anxiety, depression or other mental health challenges. Mothers also exhibited impressive increases in parenting confidence over the course of the program, in addition to decreases in reported depressive mood.

From the evaluation of the First Touch™ Infant Massage program report, 81% of participants reported substantial improvements in both their understanding of the importance of being in tune with their baby's needs and in their ability to perform the massage strokes that their baby enjoys.

One of the mothers expressed the positive changes in her communication with her infant. "My attitude isn't trying to be 100% perfect anymore. It is more focused on reading him and seeing what he wants. It's not trying to do every single step by the book. [When he cries now] I feel more relaxed. I can be the support for my baby when he needs me".

In the latest First Touch™ group Kerry, a RASA Infant Massage Instructor, reported that a highlight for her was hearing mothers say to their babies "I love you" in five different languages.

Many first time mothers participating in the program felt isolated and lacked the confidence to connect with their community. After attending First Touch™ Program at local community centres, they were able to meet other mothers and their children and have access to a range of parenting and health services which helped build their confidence and also increased the wellbeing of the infant.

The RASA Infant Massage Program adopts a strengths-based approach recognising the resilience of parents by focussing on their potential, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacities, rather than their limitations. This acts as a valuable engagement strategy for reaching those families lacking confidence to seek help. The message is not that 'you have done something wrong, so you need us to help you'.

The program is also low cost, meaning that it does not rely on parents purchasing any additional resources in order to benefit from it.

The RASA Infant Massage program, initially funded through Communities For Children for two years (Commonwealth funds distributed through Anglicare), will be self funded in 2015/16 by Relationships Australia (SA) in order to continue the program.

This is an inspiring initiative that is actively promoting the safety and wellbeing of children.