Research Question
What are the effects of infant massage on the stress levels of mothers of infants, birth to three years old, residing in a family shelter in Northern California?

Abstract
The purpose of this mixed method study was to examine the effects of infant massage as an occupational therapy intervention, specifically for reducing stress among homeless mothers living at a family shelter in San Jose, CA. Quantitative data was collected using the Parenting Stress Index Short Form (PSI-SF) and qualitative data was collected using a semi-structured interview, following the sixth attended session of infant massage. Content analysis revealed the following themes: parenting competency, parent-infant attachment and connection, communication, routine, and child behavior. Although there was not sufficient data to conclusively answer the research question, results suggest that coaching homeless mothers on infant massage is an effective occupational therapy intervention with a wide variety of benefits, including ameliorating stress related to parenting.

Literature Review
Women with young children are one of the fastest growing sectors of the homeless population. Homeless mothers experience significant levels of stress as a result of various factors. Some of the increased stress levels have been attributed to their parenting responsibilities and their relationship with their children. Training in infant massage has been associated with increased parental confidence and involvement, which also may reduce stress. Mothers’ abilities to read infant cues may be strengthened, increasing parental competence and satisfaction with parenting roles.

Methodology
This mixed method study was conducted using The Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI-SF) (Abidin, 1995) and a semi-structured interview. The instrument was administered to eight participants at pretest and one participant at posttest. Qualitative data was also collected post-intervention using five open ended questions.

Results
Participants ranged in age from 23-36 years old and were predominantly Hispanic. The number of children and infant massage sessions attended for each participant varied. Pretest data reveals a raw score average of 30 (75%) for parental distress, 14.25 (21%) for parent-child dysfunctional interaction, 25.63 (54%) for difficult child, and 69.88 (52%) for total stress, with a defense
responding score of 16.5 (84%). Five out of eight participants (62.5%) had scores that are considered clinically significant (85th percentile or higher) in at least one subscale of the PSI-SF. Posttest data for the one participant revealed a decrease in two out of three PSI-SF subscales including Parental Distress and Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction, as well as in the Total Stress score and Defensive Responding score. The above chart shows the pretest and posttest results for participant #3. Analysis of the interview revealed the following themes: parenting competency, attachment and connection between the mother and infant, mutual communication, routines, and response to child behavior.

Discussion

Due to limitations, the data collected was insufficient to adequately answer the research question posed in this study. However, the results suggest that the use of infant massage may have many benefits including enhanced parenting competency, increased communication, enhanced parent-infant attachment, improved maternal perception of infant behavior, and facilitation of parental roles and family routines. The pretest data provides meaningful information regarding stress levels of homeless mothers residing in a family shelter. This includes stress attributable to the role of being a mother emphasizing the demands and responsibilities of parenting and not having sufficient control over the environment while living in the shelter. These results were consistent with past research.

The qualitative data collected suggests that as the mother became more aware of her child’s needs, she was able to use infant massage to enhance bonding, communication and contact with her child. The workshops helped her to feel validated and competent in her role as a mother and encouraged her to explore techniques as a routine throughout the week. Our research supports that infant massage is a cost-effective and highly beneficial occupational therapy intervention for enhancing bonding and decreasing stress levels for mothers living in homeless shelters.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include a small sample size and high attrition rate leading to potentially low generalizability and a lack of range of participant experience demonstrated in the results. Due to shelter restrictions our research did not have a control group limiting the ability to detect for confounding variables. Participant bias may have been a limitation when filling out the self reported PSI-4-SF as demonstrated by the high defense responding score. Triangulation of data was not obtained.

References