Title: Use of Infant Massage to Support Homeless Mothers

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Significance of topic

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of homeless families, with single mother families making up the majority of this population (“National Coalition for the Homeless”, 2011). Compared to housed mothers, homeless mothers experience greater stress, lower self-esteem, and increased depression (Averitt, 2003). Because these factors have the potential to negatively impact the ability for mothers to fulfill their roles as parents, and participate fully in the occupation of child rearing, it is important to identify interventions to reduce maternal stress and improve parental competence. The use of infant massage has been shown to reduce maternal stress among housed mothers (Beyer & Strauss, 2003). However, there is a paucity of research that identifies the role of infant massage in stress reduction among homeless mothers. Due to the significant increase in stress that is experienced by homeless mothers, research should be conducted in order to determine whether infant massage is an effective intervention for stress reduction among homeless mothers.

This pilot study aimed to address this need through the instruction of infant massage to homeless mothers at Family Supportive Housing, a homeless shelter located in San Jose, California. This instruction was led by occupational therapy students twice per week for a duration of eight weeks. Maternal stress levels of mothers of infants ages 0 to 3 years were assessed using the Parenting Stress Index - Short Form (PSI-SF; Abidin, 2012) at their first and third infant massage sessions. The PSI-SF (Abidin, 2012) is an established stress measurement tool that can be administered in ten minutes. In addition, a semi-structured interview was intended to be conducted at the third session in order to help researchers develop an understanding of the lived experience of the mothers.

Occupational therapy is the ideal profession to provide this intervention due to their expertise in role fulfillment and routine development and maintenance. Occupational therapists can provide mothers with the skills to implement infant massage into their daily lives, therefore assisting in the development of routines and contributing to the frequency of infant massage use. In addition, occupational therapists have the potential to help homeless mothers fulfill their occupational role as parents through the acquisition of parenting skills, such as the ability to modulate their infants emotions using massage strokes (Clausen et al., 2012).

Current research has shown that infant massage is an effective intervention in the reduction of maternal stress and improving perceived maternal competence (Gnazzo, Guerriero, Folco, Zavattini, & De Campora, 2015). Studies regarding infant massage have demonstrated that following infant massage, both mothers and parents feel a decrease in stress, as well as an increased feeling of control in their abilities to communicate with and soothe their infants (Clausen et al., 2012; Gnazzo et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2015).

Infant massage may have the potential to be a powerful tool for mothers in reducing stress and improving infant bond, and occupational therapists are the ideal profession to implement this intervention.

Research:
This research sought to examine the stress levels of mothers of children ages 0-3 years living in a homeless shelter and to determine how learning infant massage affects maternal stress levels. Research was conducted for nine weeks at San Jose Family Supportive Housing using the Parental Stress Index Short Form (PSI-SF) as an assessment tool for pre-intervention data. Post-intervention data was intended to be collected using both the PSI-SF and qualitative interviews to gather information regarding the mother’s lived experience and how the intervention was incorporated into daily life. However, post-intervention data was unable to be collected as no participants attended the required number of intervention sessions.

Results:

The participants in the study completed the PSI-SF pre-test, which provided data regarding their current stress levels. Because post-intervention data was not collected, the examination of results is limited to the PSI-SF pre-test data. While this study was not able to obtain post-test PSI scores or post-intervention interviews, it has highlighted critical recommendations for future research in order to yield more conclusive results regarding the use of infant massage among homeless mothers.

References:


Beyer, K., & Strauss, L. (2003). Infant massage programs may assist in decreasing parental perceived stress levels in new parents. Occupational Therapy In Health Care, 16(4), 53-68. doi:10.1080/j003v16n04_04


