



# assage in

Bullying,

In the quiet of a school-day afternoon, Johnny gives his classmate a “bear walk,” with a “cat grip” thrown in for good measure. It’s not a game, it’s massage, and it’s working to prevent bullying and decrease aggression in school-age children.

## SOOTHING SALVE

Science has shown us that touch is an important part of every child’s development. Its importance, however, doesn’t stop at infancy, but continues throughout life in creating happy, healthy, stress-free individuals.

Programs to teach this important lesson to children have been successfully implemented in the classroom for nearly 20 years. An example of a protocol that works is the Massage in Schools Program (MISP), which teaches elementary school students simple massage strokes they can use with each other in the classroom.

Massage in a school environment has been shown to improve childrens’ concentration levels and their ability to stay on task with their schoolwork, but there are even more intriguing implications. Schools where MISP has been implemented have

By Rebecca Jones

# the Classroom

aggression diminish with student-to-student interaction

anecdotally reported decreased bullying and aggression, and an increase in children's self-esteem and empathy toward others.

## AT THE TEACHERS' REQUEST

MISP was created more than 10 years ago by Sylvie Hetu, an educator and massage instructor in Montreal, Quebec, and Mia Elmsater, an educator and massage instructor in Sweden. Today, the program is in hundreds of schools in 20 countries, and is especially popular in the United Kingdom.

The massage program grew out of the infant massage training that Hetu and Elmsater received. "I was a school teacher before I became an infant massage instructor, so I was known in the school system," Hetu says. "Teachers would ask me for ideas for touch and movement exercises, and I would show them some things on a one-to-one basis, but there was no formal program. Mia did the same in Sweden. People would just ask us and we would show them," she says.

That changed in 1999 when the director of a massage school in London invited Hetu and Elmsater to give a presentation on what they were informally showing their colleagues. "There were 350 people at that conference," Hetu says. "The day after, the telephone wouldn't stop ringing."

Hetu and Elmsater decided British schools would benefit by having access to such a program, so they created one. "We took

weeks, months, years to refine it, to make it perfect so it would fit in everywhere, in all cultures," Hetu says.

The program began in England, but has since spread to Scotland, Ireland, Canada, and Australia, as well as other parts of Europe and Asia.

## FROM BEAR WALK TO CAT GRIP

Under the tutelage of trainers, MISP teaches children how to take turns massaging each other while seated at their desks or sitting on the floor. The strokes are mainly on the arms, shoulders, and head, and don't involve oils or the removal of clothing. Hetu says children are taught always to ask permission before touching each other, and they're assured they always have the right to decline the touch if they choose.

"Some kids do say no," Hetu says. "Some days you're just not in the mood for massage. That's just human. And if they don't feel like massage, they're invited to stay in the room and watch. We know, even just by watching a massage, there are



Massage in the classroom has been shown to help students focus more fully on their schoolwork.

relaxing, hormonal effects. But it's rare that children refuse, because they really like it."

Typically, teachers will lead their students through massage routines at the start of the day or after lunch. Once a child masters the

basic routine, it takes about seven minutes to complete, Hetu says. Many teachers set aside 15 minutes so each child can both give and receive a massage.

The basic routine consists of simple movements that evoke images that engage the child's imagination. For instance, there's the "cat grip," which involves making gentle movements with the fingers on one side of the neck and the thumb on the other side. There's the "bear walk," which begins at the base of the spine. The child presses one hand after another, "walking" up the spine and down again. There's also the "baker," which involves gentle, kneading movements with palms and fingers on the shoulders. A favorite with the children

is the "heart," where they move their hands in ever-larger heart-shaped formations over their partner's back. Despite the cute names, what's going on is good, old-fashioned massage.

"When you get the children working together like this, they start interacting in a new way," says Jenn Johnson, a British Columbia massage therapist who has completed her MISP training and hopes to get the program introduced into more schools in her area. She says massage creates change in the classroom. "It seems to break up cliques."

Hetu says teachers have told her that children who have massaged each other are much more reluctant to bully each other. "Also, with massage, there's no grading, no competition about who's first or last," she says. "The routine is for everyone. They discover that some children, who may not be that intellectually gifted, are




Children using the Massage in Schools Program protocol are not only having fun, but are unknowingly facilitating the good health of their classmates. Images provided courtesy of Massage In Schools Program.

“

When you get the children working together like this, they start interacting in a new way.”



A large, bold red letter 'Y' is positioned vertically on the left side of the page. To its right, a young girl with long brown hair, wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt and purple pants, is standing and looking up at the letter. She has her hands on the letter, as if she is holding or supporting it. The background is plain white.

For more information about MISP, or to see a schedule of upcoming trainings, including one in Denver, Colorado, January 28–29, visit the Massage in Schools Program website, [www.misa-usa.com](http://www.misa-usa.com). The program's founders have also published a book, *Touch in Schools: A Revolutionary Strategy for Replacing Bullying with Respect and for Reducing Violence* (2010, Ur Publications and Programmes).

really good with massage. They gain new status among one another.”

## HEALTHY TOUCH


While the Massage in Schools Program has found success in Canada and abroad, it's been more slowly implemented in the United States. The American massage therapists who have been through the program's training are hoping that as more parents, teachers, and school officials learn about the benefits of massage for children, the school program will catch hold here as well.

“The issue here is that we, as a nation, are touch-phobic,” says Colorado massage therapist Laura Charlton, who learned about MISP during her training as an infant massage specialist. She is one of the first Americans certified to teach it. The problem, says this mother of two, is that in the United States, “touch in schools is forbidden.”

Charlton almost got the program into her children's school in suburban Denver, but at the last minute, the principal backed out, citing other parents' concerns. Charlton hopes that

with some more parent education, she'll succeed in launching the program.

“People want to see it in action here,” Charlton says. “They know it's working in Europe and Canada, but they want to see it working in the States, too.”

Hetu thinks it's a shame that people are afraid of touch. “Touch is quite taboo in several cultures and sometimes people think that if we bring touch into schools it will teach children to have early sex and all sorts of things. But long-term, we know it's just the opposite, because children need touch,” Hetu says. “It's part of who they are. We give them a healthy tool for touch.” 

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