

# Human Touch in Education

## *The Massage in Schools Programme*

by Mia Elmsäter and Sylvie Hétu

*Mia Elmsäter and Sylvie Hétu are both mothers of three grown up children. They have been working under the International Association of Infant Massage (IAIM), as instructors teaching parents since the 80s, and then as trainers of instructors. Both have been instructors since 1989 (Hétu) and 1990 (Elmsäter). As members of the Education Committee of IAIM, they educate instructors and train trainers globally. Together and independently they have created films and various programmes to support parent educators, teachers, and older children, as well as parents and babies. Stemming from their pioneering work with infant massage in their respective countries, (Elmsäter in Sweden and Hétu in Canada), there were extended requests for adapting this programme for various ages and situations. There were invitations to teach toddler groups, massage in day-care centres, pre-schools, schools, and in nursing homes, as well as to give lectures and workshops to teachers in conferences, colleges, and universities. Their combined passion, vast experience, and training in education, including Steiner, Montessori, and mainstream approaches, leads to a very solid foundation of expertise and experience underpinning the programme.*

*“There is but one temple in the universe, and that is the Body of Man. Nothing is holier than that high form. Bending before man is a reverence done to this Revelation of the Flesh. We touch heaven when we lay our hands on a human body.”*

~ Novalis

In this article we'll introduce a revolutionary programme for improving the quality of children's schooling and learning experience which is simple, cost-effective, and easily implemented. We're referring to the Massage in Schools Programme (hereafter referred to by its acronym, MISP), which we created at the turn of the millennium, and which is now well established in over 20 countries around the world.

The idea of bringing positive touch into schools (MISP) grew naturally from the authors' combined professional skills and their many years of experience. We concluded that bringing the principle of simple massage, where children would massage one another every day, simply and over clothes, would make a very positive contribution to the emotional, educational and spiritual well-being of children all over the world. A simple non-invasive massage routine was therefore created. The routine was put

opment of motor skills.

The massage routine has been very carefully considered from a number of different key perspectives: from those of the health and well-being of the child, from the standpoint of teachers, and from that of schools themselves. We have also devoted careful consideration to parents and family life. (A section written especially for parents can be found in Chapter 35 our book *Touch In Schools*; see Resources section, below.) Built into the programme's very design is a comprehensive holistic approach to child development and the inherent age-appropriate needs at various stages of their development.

year 2000, and it's now expanding globally at an increasingly rapid rate. Whilst touch has, of course, always been present in

to formally design a recognised, multicultural, international curriculum respecting children of all cultures. It's therefore the

ing systems across many countries and continents. In short, the MISP proposes the universal introduction and embedding of touch and movement into the school curriculum and into school activities more generally. We maintain that movement and touch are necessary for children's healthy learning and well-being.

### **The Importance of Rhythm**

our body. Our hearts beat rhythmically; we breathe rhythmically;

such as our sleep patterns and our daily meals. There's also rhythm in our weekly routines. Rhythm is found in the passing of seasons and the months of the year, in the movement of the

a sense of security and a foundation on which to stand.

For children, rhythm is of crucial importance, and should be given prime consideration within education. Education needs a rhythm. Rhythm and repetition have an impact on the integration and the forming of children. It's therefore recommended that a discernible rhythm be created for the massage routine in the classroom, and that it is made to come alive for the children. A daily routine at the same time is the best kind of rhythm. If the teacher decides not to do it every day, then there should still be a rhythm ~ for example, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or perhaps once a week at the same time on the same day.

There are also various simple touch activities that can be adopted by teachers and/or parents, which can become part of the school and/or family rhythmic routine.

### **The Importance of the Body and Movement**

Too many national educational curricula seem to have mis-

For so many children, this results in multiple challenging behaviours, and this in turn greatly challenges both parents and teachers. Children should also learn with and through movement – in other words, movement should be integrated into all school subjects, and not be kept as a separate subject or activity, such as Physical Education (PE) (for many practical examples, see Chapters 32 and 33 of our book *Touch In Schools*). Being active in schools is important for the child; however, it needs to be a healthy active movement. Children's natural tendency to learn through movement should be put to positive use. Hopefully, unhealthy movement would then be eradicated, both within themselves and in relation to others.

children have shown that children from four to 12 years of age are primarily kinaesthetic learners. This means that their entire body needs to be involved in the learning process. Although

to forget or omit to put it into practice. Of course, movement does happen at breaks and in gym or PE lessons, but movement seems to be compartmentalised and separated from the learning that takes place in the classroom. In the classroom, children are



reminded to sit still. However, children hear more if their body is actively involved: the MISP ethos is to “live the knowledge”, and seamlessly bring touch and movement into curriculum subjects. With a little imagination, many ideas can be found that effectively introduce touch and movement into the various subjects.

### **The Programme**

the actual MISP routine itself. The second is the incorporation of touch and movement into the school’s national curriculum subjects; and the third one comprises activities that involve touch and movement. All of these are covered in the intensive Massage in Schools Programme Instructors’ Course.

#### **1. The Massage In Schools Programme Routine**

This consists of several massage movements that children do on each other, one-on-one. The children are seated at their desks

out over their clothes, on the back, arms, and head. It is most

begins. The full routine takes approximately seven to eight minutes, in other words, about 15 minutes in total for both children to massage each other.

Instructors are taught the full routine in the Massage In Schools Programme Instructors’ Course, and they are then

massage on another adult or in the air.

#### **2. Touch Games and Activities**

These are simple activities that can be carried out at any time, at the convenience or discretion of the teacher, thereby bringing touch and movement into the normal school day. They can be used for a variety of reasons, such as developing social skills, creating a break to improve their ability to concentrate, or just for a bit of fun. Suggestions for touch games and activities are included in the latter part of our book.

#### **3. Touch and Movement into the School Curriculum**

Teachers are encouraged to incorporate touch and movement

delivery of national or core curriculum subjects. All subjects can be taught with touch and movement. In addition, all three aspects of the MISP can be applied at home with the child, and indeed with all members of their family.

In terms of training, the MISP routine is only taught on MISP Instructors’ Courses. While the routine is easy to implement in

the classroom, it’s important that it is taught properly, and that both the routine, and, most especially, the children are respected. So whilst the programme is simple, behind the procedural simplicity lies a great deal of thought, effort, and expertise that have been put into the development of the programme. It works because dedicated instructors make it look easy for the teachers and children to do.

Furthermore, respect is always held paramount for everyone involved in the process. The programme is primarily experiential in nature, and as a result it cannot be learned and understood adequately through the printed word alone. Moreover, physical touch can occasionally cause previously unprocessed issues of abuse to rise to the surface. Therefore, a fully participative training in the delivery of the programme becomes especially important.

In order to implement the programme, teachers, parents, school staff members, and others need to take a two-day course to learn more about the MISP. The other option is that the school engages the services of an already trained MISP Instructor to teach the routine to the children of the class.

It’s strongly advised that teachers either take the course them-

port the learning of the routine, and implement it successfully. It is in this way that the quality and integrity of the programme can be successfully maintained. (Information about the closest Massage In Schools Association Branch, MISP Trainer, or MISP Instructor can be found on the website. A list of all International MISP Instructor Trainings can also be found on the website: [www.messageinschools.com](http://www.messageinschools.com))

### **Touch and the Emotions**

We tend to have emotionally-laden views about touch. Different types of touch can quickly and easily trigger a wide spectrum of emotions. Therefore, we also link touch with emotions. At times, touch can be scary and can be used to hurt us. On the other hand, touch can help us to relax, can bring a feeling of love, and be nurturing. Touch is thus “felt” in many different ways. Touch, and the way it is provided, does have physiological effects on/in the body. Both research and new thinking in the philosophy of mind are now breaking down the previously existing Cartesian barriers between mind, body, and heart. We

(being nervous when speaking in front of people).

We also know that children come to school with their own

number of factors. The emotional state in which a child enters a classroom can have a drastic effect on her own learning capabilities, on behaviour, and on the relationship with her classmates or the teacher. One notable example is that of the phenomena of bonding and attachment. Since the work of the well-known British psychiatrist John Bowlby in the 1950s, hundreds of researchers have been investigating the theories of bonding and attachment. The MISP incorporates many elements of bonding, the main ones being touch, rhythm, and respect. Teachers implementing the programme are instructed to be strategic in the pairing of children,

to develop secure bonds. Strategic pairing can help children to create one-on-one bonds with other children, and improve the collective bonding of the entire class. Instead of connecting with just one or two children, which can lead to cliques and anti-social behaviour, children learn to create bonds with several children. When children in a classroom or even an entire school have the opportunity to experience simple and nurturing contact with all their classmates, a greater sense of security can develop.

A conscious, purposeful, intentional, and positive use of touch with children in both school and home settings can lead to dramat-

the MISP have been researched and validated. Ideally, the MISP should be implemented with the highest ethos and professionalism in all schools, and ultimately be regulated and approved globally by all national schooling curricula.

### **Guilt, Shame and Healing around Touch**

Our individual relationship with touch is worth considering more closely. Each of us has a particular story in regard to touch.

born, and in many cases by the touch we received from our primary caregivers. It is important to understand the fact that our own

touch, and therefore our ideas about the value of massage.

Emotions are individual, and it is therefore important to adopt a welcoming attitude towards them. Some people have been touch deprived, in which case the necessary tools for entering into a relationship that includes nurturing touch may be missing or dam-

ries for one's self, the capacity to express intimacy via proper sensible touch, and knowing the difference between socially acceptable and unacceptable touch, which is dependent on the degree of intimacy. Touch may simply feel awkward or uncom-

minimum-touch policy. This is usually not even a conscious decision, nor is it explicitly acknowledged.

Life may have started with a painful experience, either because

born prematurely. There may have been painful, though necessary, medical interventions. Touch may then be connected with pain. This may have even occurred during a time when many people believed that newborn babies did not feel pain. Other people may have experienced abuse of different kinds, such as sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. People who survive this type of abuse

feelings is often a struggle.

It's never too late to bring healing and to transform painful past experiences and mistakes, both at the individual and the social level. It is possible to move out of guilt and shame in relation to painful events in our lives, and with regards to mistakes we may have committed toward others. The MISP is a tool for healing the past and for bringing light, thereby creating a brighter and more

enlightened future, where nurturing touch will be recognised as

It's important to mention that the MISP has been developed with great attention given to the issue of child protection. All legal requirements must be followed in all countries. Requirements for child protection will vary from country to country, sometimes from town to town, and even occasionally from school to school. Therefore, it is mandatory for instructors to get information about all child-protection laws, requirements and policies that are in effect before implementing MISP in any school or institution. Each teacher bringing the MISP into the classroom must also be aware of the applicable child-protection policies. A full discussion of child protection issues can be found in our book.

Finally, careful consideration of special (educational) situations and needs has also been comprehensively built into the programme. Teachers working with children who have special/additional needs often enquire as to whether the MISP is suitable for those children too. The answer, of course, is an unambiguous "yes"! Nurturing touch is for all children, without exception. Adaptations will probably need to be made both to the strokes and sometimes to the entire way the routine is performed, depending on the needs and capabilities of the child. In *Touch In Schools*, we discuss in depth a number of special situations, with ideas and

sensitive to touch; children who say "no" to massage; children who are unable to massage; the issue of varying cultural habits and practices; head lice; and the issue of children's hygiene.

### **A Wider Beneficent Impact**

As research study results on the MISP become available, and as

continues to increase. A broad consensus is emerging on the list of

been observed to date within classrooms and schools:

1. Reduction in stress levels
2. Higher self-esteem
3. Enhanced emotional competency/intelligence
4. Incidental impacts on literacy/vocabulary
5. Improved concentration/attention
6. Encouragement of integrated knowledge
7. Positive experiences of touch
8. Learning about giving and receiving
9. Social competency
10. A healthy way of learning about love and intimacy
11. A new way of communicating with their parents
12. A right to say "yes" or "no" to touch

### **A Programme for Parents and Families Too...**

At the level of parents and the family, although the MISP was designed for the school situation, massage does not only belong there. The effects of massage are not reserved only for massage-therapy clients, or for parents and babies in infant massage classes. Although massage can be therapeutic, before anything else it is about nurturing touch. We believe that the future of our programme very much lies in encouraging all parents to consider how the principles might also be applicable within family life itself. A parent taking time to massage a child will contribute to reducing the child's stress, enhancing their relationship, and helping to raise the child's self-esteem. Children who participate in the MISP will often do it spontaneously with their parents in the evening.

Before massaging their child(ren), parents can use their intuition, use ideas from this article and/or other books on baby/child massage, or contact an MISP instructor. Instructors also run classes for parents and children in the community, or teach the strokes to the parents at the child's school.

**Here are some ideas and suggested guidelines for parents who are open to practising massage with their child(ren):**

underwear on and avoid body parts related to sexuality.

be over-stimulating for some children.

ognised as having a balancing effect on children. (The effect of essential oils on adults is very different than it is on children, and sometimes even has the opposite effect. Essential oils need to be used with the help of knowledgeable aromatherapists who have experience in working with children.)

like, and adjust the pressure or strokes according to their preferences.

You can call the massage a sports massage, a climber's massage, a dancer's massage, and so on.

they encourage your child's imagination.

another's feet or shoulders while sitting on the sofa or listening to music.

work.

### **MISP for Social Change**

imagine a more effective means than this for bringing about genu-

dominated, as it is, by virtual and technology-mediated relationships rather than the truly embodied human relating that lies at the heart of the Massage In Schools Programme.

### **Further Information and Resources**

Touch in schools, a revolutionary strategy for replacing bullying with respect and for reducing violence by Sylvie Héту and Mia Elmsäter  
Foreword by Joseph Chilton Pearce

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This is the website of the publishing company that will indicate you how to order

[www.iaim.net](http://www.iaim.net)

This is the website of the international association of infant massage for parents interested in massage for their baby up to a year old.

To contact the authors and MISP founders: [info@urpublications.com](mailto:info@urpublications.com)

### **Further Reading**

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