Gentle touch and Infant massage: means to development and growth, support to child-parents interaction in premature and low birth weight newborns.

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Background. Interaction between parents and the premature is difficult. The premature children are moved away from their mothers immediately after delivery and brought to the NICU, where their parents can see them only for a few hours and several barriers make the contact with them difficult. In this context, infant massage and gentle touch may represent a support to the mother-child bonding and to the newborn's development.

Goals. To understand the benefits infant massage and gentle touch bring to both the premature child and the mother; to evaluate the behavioural reactions of prematures to tactile stimulation and the effect of the latter on their body weight.

Subjects, materials and methods. Case series. The study was carried out on a group of premature newborns and their mothers, whom were trained to perform infant massage and gentle touch. Mothers were administered a questionnaire investigating mothers' perceived benefits and newborns reactions. Newborns' behaviour was assessed according to the Brazelton neurodevelopmental scale.

Results: The main benefits observed by mothers in their children were: better relaxation (90%), recognition of mother through touch (50%). Weight speed was 40% higher than in the period of time preceding mothers' training on infant massage. Also, gradual decrease in distress signs, increase of adaptation to contact and improvement of interaction with mother, were also observed. Mothers reported an increased confidence in giving care to their children (70%), a better knowledge of the latter (50%) and a reduction of psychological distress (40%).

Conclusion. This study suggests that gentle touch and infant massage may represent a support to mother-child relationship and to the development of prematures. Teaching parents infant massage and gentle touch techniques could be usefully introduced in premature newborns nursing care plans.