

Hand Massage

Hand massage can be a powerful tool to help calm and organize a child. It can be used safely at home or school, by parents, therapists, or staff. Massaging hands works because we have SO many nerve endings in the palms of our hands. This is a great go-to to connect with a child when words aren't working.

Rubbing your hands together is **American Sign Language** for massage. A visual paired with words helps add meaning to a child in distress. Use this sign to 'ask' the child if he wants a hand massage. Teaching a child about massage BEFORE dysregulation happens is helpful. Practice at bedtime or after a bath.

Incorporate **choice** into the entire experience. Choice decreases refusals and empowers children. A choice of lotion can be used if it's available. Something that slides works better than a sticky lotion. Choice of which hand, which fingers, which arms, how many strokes, your hands or mine, are some options as well as using cute names for strokes, 'rain drops', or 'making cookie dough'.

The adult begins by doing a **self-check**. Ask yourself, am I calm? If not, take a few deep breaths to slow yourself down. Children take self-regulation cues from adults.

Ask the child if a massage is ok by rubbing hands together, offering your hands, or asking if you can put some lotion on his hands. If the child is tentative, ask 'this hand or this one?' Or, let the child put lotion on your hand if there is hesitation. This teaches **safe to touch**. 'I am in control of my own body'. Listen for verbal, and watch for non-verbal, refusals. Always honor the child.

Milk fingers, press your fingers lightly into the palm, and move your thumbs out from the center to the muscular parts of the hand. Glide your entire hand across the palm and slightly up the arm. All of this feels **delightful**.

If a child is sensitive to touch, try starting on a forearm. Some children do not like touch or are **touch averse**. These children may allow massage for about 10 or 20 seconds, then they are done! This is to be honored. Try again and give the child more control and options. With all children, make sure your touch is gently firm and not light. Walking your hands around hands and arms may help a child who can't tolerate hands-off, then on-again, or unexpected touch. It's ok to let the child give you a hand massage back. He will still benefit.

Oxytocin starts flowing between the giver and the receiver of the massage in about 20 seconds. Oxytocin is a bonding/connection hormone. If the massage is calming to the child, you will see breathing changes, head tilt, mouth dropping open, and gaze drifting (adaptive response).

Feel free to **improvise!** There is no 'right' way to give a child a hand massage. And Oh! This works on adults too! ;)

Info sheets created with ❤️ by occupational therapists.