The skin is the first and largest sensory organ to develop, it needs a lot of attention daily from right after birth, even stroking and touching your pregnant belly creates an environment of acceptance, calmness and unity. When we use loving touch and massage from right after birth a baby grows and develops optimally.

**How sensitive is a newborn baby (up to 3/4 months) to touch and massage?**

Newborn babies experience touch differently to us. A newborn baby’s nervous system is still underdeveloped hence they can be overly sensitive (tactile sensitive) or not sensitive at all (tactile dormant). A newborn baby is very receptive to input from all their senses but the senses of touch, smell and taste take pole position. Why? While baby was in utero the uterine walls touched baby 24/7 and baby could smell and taste the amniotic fluid 24/7, baby was literally submerged in mom’s touch, smell and taste for 9 months. Once born, baby relies on the same 3 senses to find mom and settle so that latching, feeding and sleeping happens spontaneously.

**How does touch stimulate a baby?**

- Supportive or firm touch is calming to baby, it reaffirms that he or she is not alone. Compare the cramped space in utero to the vast space outside mom’s body and it is easy to understand how baby easily feels abandoned or alone without touch.
- Firm loving touch or massage helps baby to create a body map in the brain, because the brain can only use, move and develop what the brain is aware of. Through massage the brain learns what the body looks like, and the more accurate the body map, the better the brain and body develops.
- Massage leads to a state of relaxed alertness...the optimal state to adapt to life outside the womb. Being relaxed and aware is the ideal circumstances for the central nervous system to mature so a baby is not overwhelmed and hyperactive nor switched off, floppy and passive.

**Why is a baby’s experience of touch (such as tickling of the toes) different to ours?**

- The toes are a long way away from the brain, in fact the longest nerve in the body is between the brain and the big toe. The nerves from the brain to the hands are shorter, hence baby grasps long before baby can stand.
- Some babies avoid touch due to a tricky birth or ongoing painful medical procedures. They avoid touch, because they start to associate touch with pain – which compromises feeding and sleeping because feeding without touch is very difficult. Other babies love touch and simply cannot get enough of it; they seek touch, feed and digest easily which also makes sleeping more restful.
- An adult can think about touch sensations i.e. ‘I don’t like receiving an injection, but I know I need it’ and make sense of what they are feeling. A baby can’t think rationally, they simply react – either towards or away from touch.
How does a baby benefit from contact?

Skin contact:
• Relaxes and calms baby
• Reaffirms that baby is not alone
• Secretes feel good hormones that aids emotional development, and boosts immunity
• Naturally invites eye contact and bonding
• Helps the baby to seek touch and not avoid touch so that when baby is older, baby reaches out and makes friends spontaneously.

What are the best ways to enhance a baby’s touch experience?

• Approach baby respectfully and gently
• Make sure the room is warm and the surface soft and comfortable
• Don’t be in a hurry, spending quality time with your baby is not an item on a checklist
• Go slow and firm
• Talk in a slow and gentle voice
• Make eye contact with baby when he or she is facing you
• Follow your instinct but be sure to touch the whole body
• Name the body parts as you massage i.e. ‘This is your head, your neck, your shoulders, arms, hands and fingers…’
• Use natural oils so the hands glide over baby’s body, dry skin can make massage quite painful.

There are many different ways to massage. BabyGym uses 3 different massage sequences because each massage has a different purpose. So you need to ask ‘What do I want to achieve with this massage, do I want to calm or wake-up my baby?’ Infant Baby Massage uses different massage techniques for different touch experiences and the more traditional families still look towards the gogos and aunties who have their own sequence that works very effectively.

Regardless of the massage sequence you follow, here are a few basic steps:

• Talk to baby and say you are about to touch and massage to relax/stimulate etc.
• Massage the ears to put the ‘brain’s secretary’ in position so that the brain will not be overwhelmed by all the touch sensations
• Firmly trace the outline of the body from head to toe (this creates a map of the body in the brain)
• Hold the feet – it is comforting
• Oil hands and move hands from hips to shoulders then open the arms and hold the hands (3 times)
• Move hands from hips to legs and straighten the legs, and hold (3 times)
• Place a rolled up towel under the shoulders and turn baby over
• Oil hands and move hands from hips to shoulders then open the arms and hold the hands (3 times)
• Move hands from hips to legs and straighten the legs, and hold (3 times)
  Follow your instinct further.

Development of the senses works like a domino-effect, if the skin is happy and relaxed the senses of smell, taste, hearing and sight follow and develop so much better. Make loving touch and massage part of your daily lives, wash baby with a bit more care and attention, make eye contact, and touch and name the body parts. Fall in love with the wonder of the little miracle in your hands.