



Massage for Children

These Global Ambassadors Are Changing Kids' Lives Through Touch

By Allison M. Payne

As a professional massage therapist, you already know massage can be a powerful force for enhancing health and well-being. It also has the potential to transform lives, especially for those members of our global community who are often most vulnerable: children.

It was with kids in mind that pediatric massage specialist Tina Allen, LMT, CPMPT, CPMT, CIMT, founded her nonprofit Liddle Kidz Foundation (liddlekidz.org). Since its inception, Allen, accompanied by her teams of Global Ambassadors, has traveled on many overseas missions to bring massage to some of the world's most underserved populations in nations including the Philippines, Vietnam and most recently, India.

In late 2017, Allen and her team of 30 volunteer health care providers visited locations in India including Mumbai, Varanasi, Jaipur, Delhi and Agra and

worked with clients and caregivers in a variety of settings, including orphanages, schools for special-needs children, clinics, hospitals and others.

Culturally, India is fairly receptive to massage therapy, although the idea of massage as a health care practice is relatively new, Allen told *MASSAGE Magazine*.

"Baby massage is a natural part of Indian culture and traditional child care," Allen said. "During my last visit to India, many people told me about how their grandmother and mother massaged them as a baby, but they never knew that there were medical benefits associated with

receiving massage therapy," she added.

Those medical benefits are especially true when it comes to special-needs kids, one of the populations on which this trip focused. (Other populations Allen's group worked with include children with HIV/AIDS, families living in slums, residents of the HOPE Foundation leprosy village and women who are acid attack survivors.)

"Throughout India there are a large number of children affected by special health care needs [and] it is not uncommon that the families and staff do not have access to therapies and consistent health care," Allen said. "It is the mission of the Liddle Kidz Foundation to increase a child's access to regular health care and therapy, along with education for their caregivers, who lack the necessary support to provide the children with the best developmental care possible."

Tools for Parents

In India, "We saw a lot of families who have children with disabilities and can't afford therapy for their kids," said Rachel Speranza, LMT, CPMT, BCTMB, a Palm

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Beach Gardens, Florida, massage therapist and registered aromatherapist who has participated in three overseas outreaches with Liddle Kidz, including the most recent trip to India.

She said parents with children diagnosed with such conditions as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, autism spectrum disorders and various other disabilities would come to scheduled outreach events, often traveling from outlying villages to attend.

In any pediatric massage situation, educating parents plays a big role. This is especially true in India, where many parents face daily challenges caring for their special-needs children with few or no helpful resources available to them, due to living in poverty, living in a remote area where accessing health care is difficult, or simply lacking knowledge about a child's condition.

"Many parents don't know how to therapeutically help their children," Allen explained. "They are struggling to not only meet their immediate needs of food, shelter and clothing, but are emotionally distraught at not being able to do more.

"With massage therapy, we teach the parents how to adapt techniques and specifically address the concerns of their child," she added. "We encourage the parent to take an active role in their child's health care, which motivates them to do more on a day-to-day basis."

"Being able to tailor specific massage therapy techniques to aid children with

special health care needs helps in many ways," said Karen Dickson, LMT, CIMT, CPMT, a Redmond, Washington, massage therapist who has attended three Liddle Kidz overseas trips, including the 2017 India outreach. For example, she said, "teaching parents how to help their kids [who] have contractures relax and be in less pain, or the opposite: teaching parents [of] children with low tone in their muscles to help stimulate them so maybe they can hold a cup or stand up on their own."

Involving parents also helps make the effects of massage therapy more sustainable, long after the outreach itself has ended and the volunteer no longer has contact with a child. Liddle Kidz ensures their work will continue "by first educating a child's caregiver, parent or orphanage staff who will stay and provide consistent care for the child. This can have an enormous impact to a family who is struggling to care for their child," Allen said.

Keeping Families Intact

Sometimes, the Global Ambassadors' work with kids and parents actually keeps families together; many special-needs kids in India end up in orphanages even though they have parents who love them, Allen said, if their parents are unable to provide the care they need.

She recalls the story of one young mother she met during the Liddle Kidz outreach in Varanasi, a woman with seven

children, four of whom were wheelchair-bound and diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. The mother was desperate to give them a better future—willing, even, to give them up, if it meant they could get help.

"She was clearly defeated, suffering from depression ... she was crying out in many ways for help," Allen said. "After she learned some of the techniques that could be applied for the children, I saw her face brighten. It was as if she found a renewed sense of purpose. She was excited to return home and practice these new techniques.

"The experience had given her hope. Now, she had tools to work with—and we saw tears of joy and appreciation stream down her cheeks," Allen said.

"This scene was repeated time after time during our outreach," Allen continued. "We met so many families who were lost, distraught and ready to leave their children with us in hope that they would be cured. One father arrived at the health care event with his daughter's bag packed, ready to pass her and the bag over to go with anyone who could provide help for her.

"You could hear through each request that the parents loved their children, but were so overwhelmed. Their struggle caused familial stress and anxiety, but through the use of touch therapy I saw the caregivers' anxiety decrease, the connection between parent and child grow and the parental confidence increase dramatically."

Ekta Bhatia, PT, MIAP, a physiotherapist based in Mumbai, India, and founder and director of the Indian School of Structural Medicine, an organization with which Liddle Kidz partnered during this outreach, agreed. “The global outreach program provided therapy solutions to the special needs of the children in ways that inspired and motivated their caregivers,” Bhatia said.

Massage Meets Emotional Needs

“The use of pediatric touch therapy can aid in addressing many physical concerns, but it also may address a child’s psychosocial and emotional needs,” Allen said.

“Clinical research has demonstrated that pediatric touch therapy may aid in a child’s physiological and neurological development and function, help soothe common discomforts, promote restful sleep, and increase healthy attachment and bonding,” she added. “Additionally, nurturing touch may improve a child’s social interaction, decrease tactile aversion, increase feelings of self-worth and value of self, and increase ability to self-regulate, all of which are needed to encourage appropriate emotional, cognitive and physical development.”

For healthy children, said Speranza, who is also an adjunct massage therapy instructor at Palm Beach State College, massage therapy can help decrease aggression, improve socialization, improve growth rate, help children digest and process food, and help them sleep and focus.

Unfortunately, many of the children the Global Ambassadors work with have experienced some trauma, whether it has to do with growing up in poor conditions, being separated from their parents, or living with the stigma of having a noticeable health condition. Apart from its effect on the physical body, unaddressed trauma also takes an emotional toll on kids that can set them up for lifelong negative effects.

Children dealing with trauma may, for example, exhibit hyperactivity, emotional numbing or reactivity,

constricted emotions, and neuroendocrine abnormalities, Allen explained.

“Traumatized children may not possess the ability to regulate their emotions” or cope effectively, she added.

To avoid any further emotional trauma to kids who already have limited coping skills, Allen uses what she calls a “structured permission process” as part of each massage therapy session. “By always asking and receiving permission prior to applying touch therapy, we empower a child to have control of the session,” she explained.

Session modifications are also made to ensure cultural considerations are fully respected. In India, Allen said, when educating a child’s family member about touch therapy techniques, that often meant matching the therapist’s gender with the gender of the person being educated.

“[And] when it comes to providing treatment for the children directly, some families prefer a female therapist to treat a female child, and a male therapist treating a boy,” she said.

An Elite Group

Landing a spot on Allen’s Global Ambassador Team is an accomplishment in itself. For the 2017 mission to India, more than 3,500 health care professionals applied, and only 30 were chosen.

“Our goal is to always select the best applicants for the particular needs of those we will work with on the global outreach,” Allen said, adding that all chosen applicants are educated, licensed and accredited in the individual forms of health care they will provide while on the trip. Liddle Kidz verifies potential volunteers’ accreditation and licensure documents, performs background checks, and requires participants’ signature on a volunteer agreement and code of conduct statement.

The team that went to India, Allen said, represented eight countries—the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, Sweden, United Arab Emirates, South Africa and Scotland—and in addition to massage therapists included nurses, physical therapists and child life therapists, who

help kids and their families cope with stress related to illness or injury and treatment.

“All Global Ambassadors have received training and certification in pediatric massage therapy, infant massage therapy and specialized education to address concerns of children with autism spectrum disorders and sensory needs, cerebral palsy and neuromuscular conditions, and trauma,” she added.

Besides expertise and specialized training in massage therapy for the populations you will serve, successful Global Ambassadors need to be excellent communicators and true team players.

“You can’t be a diva,” Speranza said. “You have to put the team first.” It’s critical, she said, to be able to put your own ego aside and be fully present in every moment.

You also need a high level of patience and understanding, Dickson said.

“Sometimes there’s language barriers, but with our work touch becomes its own language,” she said. “A smile can go a long way, a thumbs-up, a bow—if you have a loving heart and can open it up to others.” **M**

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View more photos from LiddleKidz’s trip to India at massagemag.com/liddlekidzindia.

Read “Why Pediatric Massage Requires a Unique Approach,” by Tina Allen, LMT, CPMMT, CPMT, CIMT, at massagemag.com/pediatricunique.
