

ME & SPECIAL NEEDS

Teaching the five week course as part of my exam work gave me more than I could ever have hoped for – not just with regards to experience and knowledge but also with regards to learning more about myself as a person and as a therapist.

When I was first informed that one of the mothers attending the course had a little boy with special needs, my first reaction was fear. I do not work in the healthcare profession and have no knowledge or experience with regards to special needs and, more particularly, cerebral palsy.

Working with Karen and Alex made me realise how cerebral palsy affects each child differently and how severe some cases can be. Karen attends a group for children with cerebral palsy where most of the children affected are one of a twin. In some cases both twins have severe cerebral palsy as well as being deaf and blind. Alex's condition is not as severe as many; he is mainly affected with his arms and neck being hypotonic and his legs being hypertonic, he is profoundly deaf, his sleep is affected, his legs are often cold and he suffers with colic and constipation. From a positive angle, Alex is a wonderful little boy who is always smiling and laughing and who has the most amazing blue eyes that you cannot help but fall in love with him and his already established little personality! Alex's eyesight is unaffected, he is able to chew, swallow and does not suffer from reflux as experienced by so many children who have cerebral palsy. Most importantly, during the five week course Alex started responding positively to the physiotherapy he had been receiving and was noticeably supporting and turning his head independently. By week five of the infant massage course Alex was experiencing relief from cold legs, constipation and colic and his sleep patterns had improved; all as a direct result of the infant massage.

Both Alex and his twin sister, Lauren, were born prematurely but without cerebral palsy. It is still unknown why Alex developed cerebral palsy.

Working with Karen helped me to understand how frightening it must be for parents to find out their child has special needs. There is so much information for them to take in during such a tiring and difficult time, especially in many cases, with another baby to care for. Parents must feel like medical experts by the time their baby has reached six months! It was also clear to see that support needs constantly change as children with cerebral palsy grow and change together with added pressures of family support and relationships, financial strains, sacrifices that need to be made, looking after other siblings, waiting for test results and constantly striving to try and give the affected child the greatest quality of life possible. At the same time, there are also the many confusing emotions ranging from guilt to anger to relief. Karen and Alex's medical costs were covered by private healthcare insurance but talking to Karen gave me an insight as to how much harder things are if you are relying on the NHS for healthcare. Alex had many tests and scans carried out by the age of 10 months and mostly all at the same time. If care was coming from the NHS, these tests would have been carried out over a period of two years. Not only is this stressful for the parents and subjecting the child to more general anaesthetic and

traumatic/stressful situations but also delays finding out what exactly that individual child's needs. For example, if an early MRI scan were to show that Alex would never be able to lift his head independently, prompt physiotherapy sessions could then largely concentrate on other areas that can be strengthened and improved over time.

Although the IAIM does not require Instructors to know about special needs it has helped me to understand and support Karen and at the same time understand, protect and provide the best massage instruction and adaptations for Alex. It has also enabled me to be able to support Karen and Alex discreetly so as not to draw unnecessary attention to them at the same time as ensuring that the rest of the class are not affected or neglected in any way. Because Karen was very open and happy to discuss the areas that Alex struggles with, I was able to see the benefits of infant massage at an early stage. Having brief knowledge about cerebral palsy also ensured that during discussions with Karen, I was able to understand various terms she referred to and was able to offer greater understanding.

By chance, among the mothers who attended the five week course, two turned out to be able to provide perfect support networks for Karen and Alex. Firstly, Imogen works with disabled children and had previously voluntarily set up www.checkthemap.org which is a free website detailing learning disability services in the UK. Imogen passed the relevant details to Karen and was able to give her plenty of advice and information. Secondly, Tracie is an Occupational Therapist and has previously worked within the deaf community and was able to give Karen information and advice on the pros and cons of cochlear implants which Karen is currently looking in to and considering for Alex in the future.

Learning about cerebral palsy and how the IAIM programme can help has not only been interesting but has possibly opened new doors for me.

Documenting my feelings and findings has assisted me in reflecting and carefully thinking about what I learnt during the course and how valuable that learning process has been.

In summary, the IAIM Infant Massage Course can offer relief from many ailments, improved sleep and relaxation, assist with calming and reassuring during medical appointments, can be used to involve siblings, offer support, the sharing of information and socialising for caregiver and baby. I feel this experience demonstrates that Infant Massage is beneficial to **ALL** caregivers and babies.