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**TRADITIONAL BABY
MASSAGE AND CARE
IN SIERRA LEONE**

**Shared cultural practices
from different
communities for caring
for babies**



**CHILD
HEROES**



**DON BOSCO
Fambul**

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Introduction

This guide is a practical resource for teenage mothers, young caregivers, and families. It explains traditional baby massage and everyday care practices shared by Sierra Leonean traditional mothers in Freetown, together with supportive notes from psychomotricians.

In many Sierra Leonean communities, baby massage is part of daily life. Caregivers use warm water, gentle touch, oils, and local herbs to comfort babies, keep them warm, support movement, and promote rest. These practices are not only about the baby's body—they also strengthen bonding, attachment, and the caregiver's confidence.

For Child Heroes and Don Bosco Fambul, this guide is especially important because it helps mothers understand their baby's needs. Through respectful touch and attentive observation, caregivers learn to read the baby's signals, respond with calm, and build a safe and loving relationship that supports healthy development.

This is not a medical or clinical therapy manual. It is a community guide that documents cultural practices and provides clear, step-by-step instructions. If a baby is unwell or shows unusual symptoms, caregivers should seek professional medical support.

How to Use This Guide

- Use the steps as a guide. Be gentle, go slowly, and stop if the baby shows distress.
- Choose a warm, safe space. Wash your hands and keep materials clean.
- Massage is best when the baby is calm—after bathing, before sleep, or when the baby needs comfort.
- When in doubt, ask a health worker, nurse, or trained professional.

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1. Cultural Perspectives

Traditional practices differ across ethnic groups and families. The examples below are shared as cultural knowledge from the facilitators.

Oku tradition (shared by Abioseh Alice Beale)

In the Oku tradition, fresh green bitter leaves are gently rubbed and the liquid that comes out is collected. A single drop may be given to the newborn to help the baby pass the meconium (first stool).”

Mandingo tradition (shared by Aminata Koroma)

To check whether a newborn is alive and responsive, some families gently tap the soles of the feet and the waist with an adult palm.

Mende tradition (shared by Hannah Sesay)

After birth, some families stretch the baby’s legs and place the hands behind the back to support reflexes and flexibility. Some families also give small amounts of warm water to help flush liquids from the stomach.

Mende tradition (shared by Luba Biouvwi)

Some families apply an eye ointment called TERO to support clearer vision (traditional belief).

Temne tradition (shared by Josephine Conteh)

To identify a painful area, some caregivers place the baby across the leg, slightly turned to the left, and gently touch the back to locate discomfort.

2. Why Caregivers Massage Babies

Traditional mothers described the following reasons for baby massage:

- To ease pain or discomfort that may not be obvious to the caregiver.
- To support blood circulation.
- To help keep the baby warm, especially along the spine.
- To support digestion and healthy bowel movement.
- To relax the body and support muscles and bones to grow strong.
- To help the baby sleep and rest well.

Note: Traditional mothers recommend massage in the morning and evening, especially when a baby is unwell. For children over two years, massage is usually used only when needed (for example, when sick).

3. Head Massage

Materials:

- Warm water
- Clean towel and soft cloth/cotton
- Stikine weed leaves (as available)
- Orié or Madonie ointment (or similar traditional ointment)
- Burn Palm oil (Natai)
- Neva dye

Safe Positions:

Choose a position that supports the baby's head and keeps the airway clear:

- Baby on the caregiver's lap, with one hand supporting the head.
- Baby lying on the stomach, while the caregiver supports the face and massages the back of the head gently.

Positions to Avoid:

- Sitting the baby upright to massage the head.
- Lying the baby on the side while massaging the head.
- Holding the baby upside down.



4. Body Massage

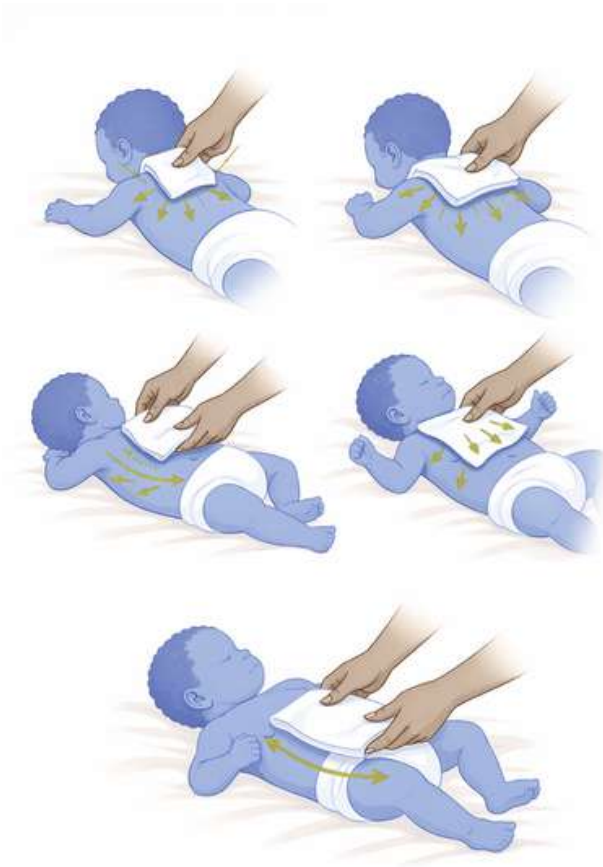
Materials (use as available and only when needed):

- Large clean towel or cotton lapa
- Warm/hot water and baby bowl
- Oils/ointments (e.g., palm oil, nut oil, Orié/Madonie, cold rub, goat fat— according to local practice)
- Traditional herbs (e.g., osho/clay, bitter leaves), black soap or traditional soap (for bathing)

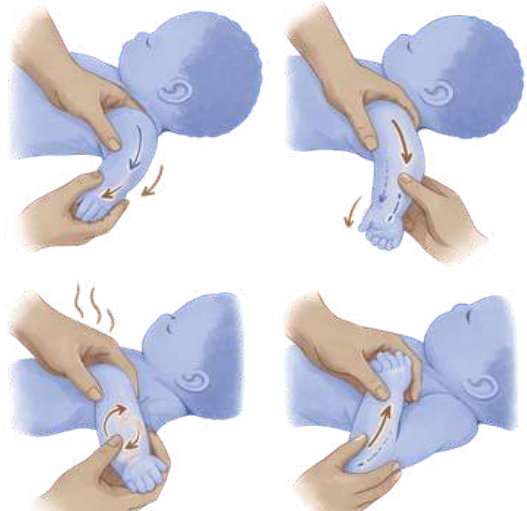


Steps:

1. Place a kettle of warm water close by and bring materials within reach.
2. Apply the warm towel to the baby's neck, shoulders, sides, chest, and waist.



3. Rub a small amount of oil/ointment between your palms. Massage gently from the neck to shoulders, sides, back, waist, and chest. Do not press hard.
4. Massage the arms from shoulder to fingers, then gently fold and return the arm to a relaxed position.



5. Place two fingers (thumb and index) gently on the waist area for a few seconds (traditional practice) to support body shape.



6. Massage the spine gently with both thumbs after applying a little ointment.



7. Apply the warm towel after releasing the steam to the thighs, knees, calves, feet, and toes.

8. Massage the feet and toes gently, one by one, to support circulation.



Caregiver Posture and Relational Bonding During Massage

Traditional baby massage is not only about the technique in massaging the body. It is also about the caregivers posture, calm presence, and emotional connection with the baby. A relaxed cheerful caregiver helps the baby feel safe, regulated, and comforted.

Recommended Caregiver Posture:

For safe and comfortable massage, the caregiver should choose a stable position that allows both hands to be free and the baby to be well supported.

The best positions are:

- Sitting on the floor with the back supported (against a wall), with the baby placed safely on the lap.
- Sitting on a low traditional bench, as commonly used in Sierra Leone homes, keeping the body upright and stable.

Good posture helps the caregiver to:

- Avoid back and shoulder pain
- Maintain steady, gentle movements
- Hold the baby securely without tension
- Stay calm and focused during the massage



Talking, Singing, and Eye Contact

During the massage, the baby should not be treated like an object. The baby is a person who needs connection and reassurance.

For this reason, the caregiver should:

- Speak to the baby throughout the massage using a calm, warm voice
- Sing softly, especially if the baby is restless or crying
- Look into the baby's eyes when possible
- Smile and respond to the baby's facial expressions and sounds

This kind of communication helps strengthen the bond between the baby and the caregiver. It supports early attachment, emotional security, and the baby's trust in the caregiver's presence.



A Calm Environment supports the Baby During the Massage Process

Traditional massage works best when the baby feels safe. Caregivers are encouraged to create a peaceful space by:

- Choosing a friendly space with little or no cold wind
- Reducing loud noise and distractions
- Keeping all materials nearby before starting
- Using slow movements and gentle pressure
- Stop if the baby shows strong discomfort

Safety and Comfort

- Always massage gently. If the baby cries strongly, stiffens, or seems in pain, stop and comfort the baby.
- Keep the baby warm during and after massage.
- Never massage a baby with fever, severe illness, breathing difficulty, or injury without medical advice.



5. Holding and Carrying a Newborn BABY Safely

Lifting and holding

- **Use two hands:** one supports the head and neck, the other supports the back and waist.
- **Keep one hand on the head:** when changing positions, keep one hand on the head at all times.
- **Support the head:** on the shoulder, rest the baby's head on the shoulder, support the head with one hand and the body with the other.

Carrying on the back (traditional method)

Traditional mothers described carrying a baby on the back after one month of birth using a lapa/towel and an additional cloth (orja) to secure the baby. Ask an experienced adult for support when placing the baby on the back.

Practices to avoid

- Do not lift or carry a baby with one hand.
- Do not lift a baby by the feet.
- Do not carry a baby on the shoulder with support from one hand.
- Do not place a baby suddenly onto the back without support and secure tying.
- Do not carry a baby on the neck or head.



6. Caring for Eyes, Ears, Nose, and Mouth

Eyes

Useful Materials: clean towel/cloth, lukewarm water, breast milk, tirow/TERO (traditional ointment).

Process

- Soak a clean cloth in lukewarm water, squeeze, and wipe the eyes gently.
- If the eyes are stuck closed, traditional practice includes placing a few drops of breast milk to help open and reduce infection risk.
- Traditional practice includes rubbing a small amount of tirow/TERO lightly around the eyes (not inside the eye).



Ears

Useful Materials: soft cloth, broom straw (traditional), honey (traditional).

Process

- Traditional practice includes placing one small drop of honey at the ear opening for hygiene.
- Wrap a soft cloth around a broom straw and clean gently around the outer ear. Do not insert objects into the ear canal.



Mouth

Useful Materials: tomato, towel/cloth, clean water.

Process

- Peel the tomato and collect a small amount of juice on a clean finger and cloth.
- Rub gently along the gums (upper and lower) and tongue to remove dirt or residue.



7. Why Babies Cry or Feel Discomfort

Babies may cry for many normal reasons. Traditional mothers listed the following:

- Stomach cramps or gas
- Hunger
- Illness or pain
- Sleepiness
- Dirty diaper
- Uncomfortable clothing
- Uncomfortable position
- Needing to be cleaned or refreshed
- Needing attention and comfort from the caregiver

8. Cultural Note: The Umbilical Cord or Afterbirth

In certain traditions in Sierra Leone, the baby's umbilical cord is planted in the ground with a fruit seed. Tradition may believe this has meaning for the child's destiny. This section upheld cultural value; practices vary by family and community.

Appendix A. Traditional Materials Mentioned in This Guide

I. Ointments and Healing Butters — For Massage and Protection

ORIE (SHEA BUTTER)

Cultural Use: Widely used in Sierra Leone, especially among Mende, Temne, and other tribes, as a base for baby massage.

Properties: Rich in vitamins A and E, deeply moisturizing and protective for the skin.

Benefits: Supports gentle blood circulation. Shea butter is safe for sensitive skin when pure and free of additives.

Precautions: Choose pure, fragrance-free shea butter. Avoid any product with added chemicals that could irritate baby skin.



MADONI BUTTER

Purpose and use

Cultural Use: Used when babies show signs of stiffness or deep body discomfort.

Properties: Warming, anti-inflammatory qualities according to traditional knowledge.

Precautions: As with any traditional ointment, monitor closely for skin reactions. Use minimal amounts to avoid clogging delicate pores.



GOAT FAT

Purpose and use

Cultural Use: Commonly applied to the spine and joints to retain warmth.

Properties: Traditional warming agent with high heat retention.

Precautions: Always ensure animal fats are clean and free of contaminants. Test on a small area first to check for skin sensitivity.



II. Oils and Botanical Elements – For Warming, Cleansing, and Comfort

BURN-PALM OIL

Cultural Use: Used as a therapeutic rub during massage to improve circulation and warmth.

Properties: Tends to be thicker than regular palm oil and warming in feel.

Precautions: Avoid heating to excessive temperatures; apply gently.

Safety Note: Some nut oils can cause allergic reactions in infants with nut sensitivities. Patch test first (apply a small amount on the baby's forearm and observe for irritation).

VIRGIN COCONUT OIL (in case you don't find burn palm oil)

Properties: Cooling, antibacterial, and gentle hydration; rich in lauric acid.

Benefits: Hydrates the skin, may help soothe mild irritation, and supports skin barrier function.

Precautions: Use pure, cold-pressed coconut oil. Avoid if rancid; keep in cool storage.

SEED TOMATO JUICE

Cultural Use: Used with a soft cloth to cleanse the baby's tongue, gums, and mouth.

Properties: Natural cleanser.

Precautions: Avoid if the baby is allergic to tomatoes or if irritation appears.

STIKINE WEED & BITTER LEAVES

Cultural Use: Traditional plants used to reduce localized inflammation and calm skin.

Properties: Herbal wellness effects according to local knowledge.

Precautions: Ensure plants are properly identified and clean; some wild plants can be irritating.



III. Other Supportive Materials

HONEY

Cultural Use: A single drop placed in the ear as a traditional antiseptic.

Precautions: Use extremely sparingly and only externally; consult health guidance before use, especially in infants under 1 year.

TRADITIONAL BLACK SOAP

Cultural Use: For initial cleansing baths before massage.

Properties: Mild, plant-based cleansing agent.

Precautions: Avoid if baby has known skin irritation; rinse thoroughly.



IV. Safety and Precautions for Caregivers

Traditional and natural products can be nurturing but require careful use and safety awareness:

1. Use Pure, Additive-Free Ingredients:

Always choose cold-pressed, unrefined oils without synthetic fragrances or preservatives. Avoid mineral or petroleum-based oils, as these may not nourish skin and can irritate sensitive areas.



2. Patch Test on Small Area:

Before full use, apply a small amount to a baby's arm to test for irritation or allergy.



3. Avoid Essential Oils:

Highly concentrated essential oils (like eucalyptus, peppermint) should generally be avoided on infants due to potential irritation and toxicity at high concentrations.



IV. Safety and Precautions for Caregivers

Traditional and natural products can be nurturing but require careful use and safety awareness:

4. Massage Timing:

Do not massage immediately after feeding — wait 30–45 minutes to reduce discomfort or indigestion.



5. Do Not Massage If the child is sick:

Avoid full body massage if the baby has a fever, skin infection, rash, or significant discomfort until they recover.



6. Pressure and Motion:

Babies' skin and muscles are delicate — use gentle, slow, responsive motions and stop if the baby cries or seems uncomfortable.



Appendix B. Disclaimer

This guide presents traditional baby massage and care practices as shared by mothers and caregivers from Sierra Leonean communities. These practices are part of local cultural knowledge and are offered for educational and supportive purposes only.

This guide is not a medical or clinical manual and does not replace professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Child Heroes Foundation, Don Bosco Fambul, and all contributors are not responsible for any harm, injury, or health problems that may result from the application or misuse of the practices described in this guide.

Caregivers are encouraged to observe the baby's reactions, stop any practice that causes distress or discomfort, and seek medical assistance when a baby is ill, in pain, injured, or shows unusual symptoms.

All massage and care activities described in this guide must be carried out gently, respectfully, and with full attention to the baby's safety and well-being.

Responsibility for applying any practice rests with the caregiver.

Krio Songs to Comfort Crying, Babies.

Song 1

Song title: Mi pushe push.

Mi puche push.
Mama push,
Papa push.
Mi puche push

-Repeated several times

Song 2

Song Title: Bayo bayo baby

Bayo bayo baby, baby lef for cry ohh, Mama dae cam oh.
Eh eh eh.. eeehh...

-Repeated several times