

GROUP EXERCISE & MIND BODY

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Getting mum back in shape - and keeping baby happy

Pilates is the ideal exercise choice for post-natal women. It is a gentle and effective way of focusing on the postural core muscles, which can be compromised and weakened throughout pregnancy. 'Mums and Bubs' Pilates classes give new mums the opportunity to exercise with their baby, in a supportive and caring environment, with other new mums. The care and attention given to the mums and babies is essential to the class success.

Sourcing a suitable location for the class is important. It must have pram access, a lift if it is upstairs, adequate parking and air conditioning. Make sure the area is 'baby proofed'; check for electrical cables and plugs, do not leave

anything on tables that babies can pull off, make sure the floors are clean and check for small things in the room that they could put in their mouths.

If you have not had a baby, you may be unaware that most mothers feel their baby is the most wonderful, beautiful and important child in the world. I am not suggesting that as trainers we coo and ahh all the way through the sessions, but acknowledgement is vital. Know the babies' names and ages and ask the mothers about them. That said, don't forget the mother, who is in danger of being overlooked as the baby becomes centre of attention.

Screening is very important. You will need to know how the mother's pregnancy was and if the baby was delivered naturally or by 'c' section, which generally requires more recovery. Only train women who have been cleared for

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exercise by their obstetrician. This usually happens at the six to eight week check, but some mothers who have had caesareans may need twelve weeks recovery. It is also important to know if the mother is breast-feeding as she may feel uncomfortable in prone, affecting the exercise you prescribe.

It is not easy for a new mum to get to class. She may have had to wake the baby, pack nappies, wipes, bottles, dummies, blankets and toys and put a big pram into the car. She is adjusting to her new role as a mother, is most likely sleep deprived, and may be stressed or even have post-natal depression. She will be coming to the class for a break and some relaxation. It may sound improbable, but mothers do find solace in rooms of other mums and babies provided it isn't their child that is doing the crying.

Crying or unsettled babies in class can be quite disruptive. Try to make the mother feel at ease by being light-hearted and asking if you can do anything to help her – she may want to walk the baby around the room in the pram, breast-feed, or spend a few moments to settle bub. Alternatively, suggest an exercise that involves the baby. (Please note: If the sound of a crying baby is irritating to you, Mums 'n' Bubs classes may not be your thing!)

Versatility is important. You may need to throw your class plan out the window and change the class to suit the babies. If they are all sleeping and relaxed that's a perfect time to do floor work. If they are all awake and unsettled then it's good to instigate four point kneeling with the babies on the mat looking up at mum. If they all really need cuddles then squats with the mums holding the babies work well.

Consider the developmental stages of the babies. Generally those aged up to four months will be immobile; after this they may start to roll and sit with help. From six to eight months they may move a lot more or even crawling and can usually sit unaided.

You will have to make modifications for the mothers. Some may find prone lying uncomfortable and four point kneeling may be painful if carpal tunnel syndrome is present. Unilateral leg movements should be avoided if the mother has suffered, or is still suffering, any back, pubic symphysis or sacroiliac pain or instability. In these cases refer to a professional and remember to ask about non-pregnancy related complaints.

Exercise focus

1. Retraining connection with transverse abdominus and pelvic floor.

Some women can engage quality transverse abdominus connection within days after delivery, especially if they have been doing pelvic floor exercises during pregnancy. But there is evidence that shows muscle recruitment is severely compromised by prior lack of use. Some new mothers may find they 'drift in and out of their connection', so progress slowly. Cue a thirty per cent connection with emphasis on breathing and postural awareness. Always begin at fundamental level. Most women, however fit before pregnancy, will not be able to safely progress to intermediate during the postpartum stage.



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Make sure you check for diastasis recti and if a new mum has more than a two finger separation, monitor her carefully. Include abdominal indrawing in all positions and do not progress to any curl type exercise until the separation is reduced to less than two fingers. As a rule, avoid post-natal curl type exercises, separation or not, unless underlying transverse abdominus recruitment can be maintained throughout the curl.

2. Stability.

A lot of women suffer from some sort of instability after pregnancy. Train for stabilisation and proprioception. Please note if you have a participant who has had or does have back, pubic symphysis or sacroiliac pain or instability she may require medical treatment, and should be referred to a health professional.

3. Postural awareness.

Encourage correct posture as it is constantly being compromised by pregnancy and the subsequent lifestyle of a new mum. Give postural reminders, i.e. every time she finishes breast feeding reset perfect posture.

4. Encourage working the local and global muscles together and train for specificity.

Think about what a new mum does all day. She is breast feeding, lifting her baby, changing nappies and lifting, folding and pushing prams. Her shoulders inevitably become very rounded. Work on getting her shoulders back and her rhomboids working through the use of spine twists, scapula draw, rows with resistance bands and arm circles. Strengthen her upper body so she can use her arm muscles when carrying her baby rather than over-using trapezius. Also focus on lower back work, strengthening erector spinae, being careful to work safely. Work her quads with squats. After feeding her baby a new mum will want to get up off the sofa without waking her child. If her quads are weak she may be unable to do this without using her hands. She'll need to develop her strength to cope with the fact that the baby is not going to get any smaller!

5. Don't overlook pelvic floor exercises.

The pelvic floor consists of thirty per cent fast twitch fibres (to facilitate rapid sphincter closure) and seventy per cent slow twitch fibres (to maintain tone and support the pelvic organs). It is important therefore to train slow twitch by including pelvic floor exercises that encourage gradual, controlled lifting and also fast twitch where the emphasis is on a quick lift and release. Train in all positions and go for maximum hold for pelvic floor exercises, as opposed to the thirty per cent connection instructed in Pilates exercises. It is amazing how many women hold their breath during pelvic floor exercises, so it is important to teach correct breathing. Don't assume your class is doing the exercises at home; they are probably too busy to set aside specific exercise time. Give them triggers to remind them to do them every time they change a nappy or every time they hang the washing.

The hormone relaxin is released to increase joint laxity and aid the birth process and is still prevalent during the post partum stage. New mums should be cautious and gentle with stretching and mobility work because increased connective tissue laxity increases the risk of joint injury.

Training new mums can be hard work, but is very rewarding. Watching the babies grow and being involved in such a special time of a woman's life is wonderful. ♦

From 2007 Network will be offering Certificate IV in Fitness Pilates (91313NSW)
For more information, please e-mail: vanessa.como@fitnessnetwork.com.au



Donna Sizer

Donna is a personal trainer and Pilates instructor who specialises in pre and post-natal exercise. As a mum of two, she is well aware of how stressful pregnancy can be to the body and how essential it is to take time to rehabilitate after childbirth. Donna runs 'Mums and Bubs' Pilates classes in Sydney, NSW.

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