

Supporting Infant Movement Development in the NICU and Beyond: Modifying Manual Therapy Interventions for the Medically Complex Infant

Holly Schifsky, OTR/L, CNT, NTMTC, CBIS

Faculty

Holly Schifsky has worked in pediatrics for the past 28 years with the past 17 years in a level IV NICU. She is a Certified Neonatal Therapist, Certified Neonatal Touch and Massage Therapist, Certified Brain Injury therapist, a member of National Association of Neonatal Therapists, and has completed 6-month mentorship in infant/child NDT. She has worked within the NICU and NICU follow-up clinic to maximize patient and family outcomes for the most complex premature and medically-fragile term infants. Holly received her BS in OT from the University of North Dakota. She is a faculty member for the Neonatal Touch and Massage certification; and Manuel Edema Mobilization training. She is the recipient of the National Association of Neonatal Therapists Clinical Excellence award in 2018, due to her clinical expertise and dedication to advancing the therapeutic interventions for NICU infants with cardiopulmonary conditions.

Financial Disclosure: Holly Schifsky receives an honorarium from ERI.

Non-Financial Disclosure: Holly Schifsky has no non-financial relationships to disclose.

About this In-Person Course

Medically complex and extremely premature infants have a greater survivability rate with advances in maternal/fetal medicine and NICU medical technology. Effective developmental interventions require the therapists to understand embryological, maturation, and developmental impacts of these medical conditions with adaptations to manual therapy techniques to improve alignment and movement for the infants. This course will build on information from Baby Beats and Breaths but could be a stand-alone course for the seasoned clinician. Evidence based literature will be provided on development of movement, manual therapy techniques to promote ribcage/abdominal, upper airway, and segmental trunk control as infant transition away from positioning devices and require activation of postural control muscles. Information will be shared on interventions for the medically complex infant requiring ECMO, CRRT, PD, and early mobilization techniques.

Learning Objectives

- Identify the impact of prematurity on musculoskeletal development and maturation.
- Correlate the maturation of infant reflexes, synergies, and/or planes of movement to motor skill development in premature infants.
- Assess alignment of the infant spine during positioning and handling.
- Demonstrate handling techniques to support optimal alignment for segmental spinal positioning.
- Adapt the environment and/or handling interventions to reduce stress cues during motor interventions.
- Choose appropriate positioning or environmental adaptations to facilitate improved participation in daily tasks.

Audience

This course is recommended for neonatal therapists, PTs, PTAs, OTs, OTAs, and SLPs working with infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Schedule – Day 1 8:00 am to 6:00 pm

8:00-8:30 Registration

8:30-10:30 **Impact of Prematurity on Musculoskeletal Development**

- Gestational development: key systems
 - Neurological
 - Musculoskeletal
 - Orthopedic

Development of Movement

- Anti-gravity movement
- Synergies
- Reflexes
- Planes of movement
- Motor Learning in Infants
- Physiological flexion progression towards extension with active flexion

10:30-10:45 Break

10:45-12:45 **Neonatal Therapy Interventions to Support Movement Development**

- Positioning
 - Key Concepts
- Handling (15 minutes)
 - Layers of skin
 - Sensory/motor development
 - Impact of touch
 - Types of touch pressure
- Infant regulation
 - Behavioral signs
 - Parasympathetic/sympathetic signs

LAB: Handling

- Handling Small Babies: 22-28 weeks
 - Weight shifting with controlled input
 - Intentional hand placement
- Handling Maturing Babies: 29-33 weeks
 - Reduce gravitational impact, but allowance for free movement

Types of Manual Therapy

- Types of touch and hand placement
- Direction of movement

12:45-1:45 Lunch

1:45-3:45 **LAB: Types of Manual Therapy**

- Depth of pressure
- Rate/speed of movement
- Infant response

LAB: Motor Facilitation for Near-Term Babies: 33-40 weeks

- Depth of pressure
- Rate/speed of movement
- Infant response

Core Control

- Upper Airway: Common Compensatory Patterns
 - Anatomy review, including gestation
 - Soft tissue release
 - Submandibular facilitation
 - Pharyngeal lift
 - Facial mobilization
 - Anterior/lateral neck release
 - Alignment with early mobilization
 - Joint mobilization: TMJ
 - Active movement facilitation

Day 1 Continued...

Oral region: Common Compensatory Patterns

- Anatomy review, including gestation
- Soft tissue release
 - Intraoral cheek elongation
- Alignment with early mobilization
- Joint mobilization
- Active movement facilitation

Spine: Segmental Alignment and Control

- Cervical spine: Common compensatory patterns
 - Anatomy review, including gestation
 - Soft tissue release
 - C1-C2 release
 - Alignment with early mobilization
 - Joint mobilization
 - Active movement facilitation

3:45-4:00 Break

4:00- 6:00 **Thoracic spine: Common compensatory patterns**

- Anatomy review, including gestation
- Soft tissue release
- Alignment with early mobilization
- Joint mobilization
- Active movement facilitation

Lumbar spine: common compensatory patterns

- Anatomy review, including gestation
- Soft tissue release
- Alignment with early mobilization
- Joint mobilization

Active movement facilitation

What Does the Evidence Say? – Literature Review

Schedule – Day 2 8:30 am to 1:30 pm

8:30-9:00 Registration

9:00-11:00 **Abdominal/thoracic synchrony of movement and maturation**

LAB: Abdominal/Pelvic Region: Common Compensatory Patterns

Anatomy review, including gestation

- Soft tissue release
 - Pelvic Floor Release: lower abdominal elongation
 - Sacral region mobilization for fluid/gas release
 - Upper rectus abdominus release
 - Transverse thoracis release
 - Abdominal sweep
- Alignment with early mobilization
- Joint mobilization
- Active movement facilitation

Thoracic Region: Common Compensatory Patterns

- Anatomy review, including gestation
- Soft tissue release:
 - Pectoralis release then facilitation
 - Lateral neck and trunk elongation
 - Scapular mobilization with subscapularis release
 - Glenohumeral release
 - Upper, mid, lower rib release lateral cage
 - Posterior rib mobilization
- Alignment with early mobilization
- Joint mobilization
- Active movement facilitation

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In-Person Dates and Time

September 18 and 19, 2026

Children's Health Specialty Center at
Cityville Southwestern Medical District
2222 Medical District Drive
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with any special needs requests:
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Day 2 Continued...

11:15-11:30
11:30-1:30

Break

Adjunct Interventions

- Splinting and elastic taping
- Double diapering
- Active movement facilitation

Early Mobilization for Medically Complex Infants

- Goals for early mobilization:
 - Skin protections and sensory considerations
 - Musculoskeletal impact
 - Vascular impact
- NICU Delirium
 - Assessment
 - Intervention: sensory and motor
- Congenital diaphragmatic hernia
 - ECMO
 - Positioning and handling
- Nephrology: polycystic kidney disease/multi-cystic kidney disease
 - CRRT
 - Aquadex
 - Peritoneal dialysis

Course Summary

- Case study
- Goal writing
- Questions

Credits This course meets the criteria for 12 contact hours (1.2) CEUs, Intermediate Level. To receive a certificate of completion all registered attendees are required to attend and participate fully in all applicable course activities (i.e., labs, discussions, group work, polls, post-tests with passing grade of 80% or greater etc.) and complete the evaluation form.



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12 hours of this course qualify towards the discipline-specific hours for the 20-hour requirement for NDTA re-certification. They do NOT qualify towards the 8-hour NDTA Instructor requirement for re-certification.

This course meets the criteria for 12 hours that can be applied toward the Neonatal Therapy National Certification.



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**In-Person Course: Supporting Infant Movement Development in the NICU:
Modifying Manual Therapy Interventions for the Medically Complex Infant
Holly Schifsky**

☐ **September 18 and 19, 2026
Dallas, TX**

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