

Yoga for babies? It might sound like a Hollywood yummy mummy fad but there are proven physical, psychological benefits as **KATHRYN CROSS** found out about at a new class in Dereham.

Come on, baby, relax

Picture: DENISE BRADLEY

FANS OF YOGA WILL TELL YOU WHAT A WONDERFUL EXERCISE IT IS FOR BODY AND MIND – it's relaxing, toning and eases the stresses and strains of modern life.

And while celebrities such as Madonna and Jennifer Lopez swear by it to keep their bodies looking fabulous, a few yoga-loving A-listers started looking into practising the art with their newborns.

Gwyneth Paltrow and Courteney Cox are said to be huge fans of baby yoga, and while many would not have heard of it but for the celebrity following, it is not just catching on in Tinseltown.

A charity called Birthlight, founded 15 years ago, was already teaching the art to a growing fanbase as part of its aim to focus on a holistic approach to pregnancy, birth and babyhood.

Now classes are cropping up in Norfolk and Zoe Tuijl had a huge response when she launched her baby yoga classes in Dereham last month.

Zoe, 44, gave up a well-paid managerial job in Norwich in 2006 to launch her Top To Toe business offering Indian head massage, baby massage and reflexology.

"I discovered from doing baby massage that I could train in baby yoga so I did a course with Birthlight in conjunction with children's services at Fakenham children's centre," she said.

The course is aimed at babies from three months to mobile and the benefits are numerous. It improves digestion and offers relief for colicky babies, helps to settle and improve sleep patterns, enhances communication between baby and parent, strengthens muscles and promotes hormonal balance.

For parents it helps to build confidence in handling a baby, particularly useful for new mums, and promotes relaxation.

It also offers mums gentle exercise for the whole body, realigning the spine and strengthening the pelvic floor.

Help with sleep is probably the one thing most mums crave more than anything and Birthlight's website states that in one short session of baby yoga "the baby is given as much physical activity as they would receive if they were handled and carried all day. This activity will help the baby sleep more deeply".

That has to be music to any parent's ears.

And mums at Zoe's class agree their babies were easier to settle after a couple of sessions.

Hannah Grist said she was already seeing the benefits for her nine-month-old daughter Freya.

"I find the best thing is the relaxation techniques because Freya has always been difficult to settle and gets very overtired so we put the music on and it helps her chill out.



SO RELAXED: Mums Emma Lynn, left, and Karen Cobb enjoying the baby yoga classes at Dereham Leisure Centre with their babies, Josh Day, left, 11 months, and Harrison Cobb, six months.

"She sleeps really well after the class too. It is a lovely group of people. There are not that many classes you can do and as I live in Watton the only other place to try would be Norwich which is too far.

"I think the main benefit for me is the socialising aspect and to get some relaxing time. It does give you a bit of a workout but it is more of a chill out."

Michaela Harker started baby massage courses with Zoe before choosing the baby yoga sessions. Her baby Summer is eight months old and Michaela, who lives in Dereham, said they find it a great bonding exercise.

"Summer is more relaxed and although she is now crawling there are times when she does not want to do things. Zoe lets babies be babies and do their own thing as well.

"After the last class she slept for one-and-a-half hours because it is physical but relaxing at the same time. I think the music in the background helps and as the mums are all more relaxed the babies pick up on that. She loves all the singing and social interaction. We carry it on at home as well."

Zoe did not intend to work with babies when she set up Top To Toe but it has just worked out that way and she loves it.

"I like people so the idea naturally grew and then I went down the baby route probably because I had my own baby then, Thomas, who is now two," she said. "I do a lot of work with health visitors and midwives. I do some reflexology with ladies who are over their due date to induce labour. There is no scientific evidence that it works, it might just be a placebo effect. But if it helps it doesn't matter how you get there."

While Zoe is really seeing every stage of pregnancy and childhood she might even be involved with a family before they have actually conceived, offering fertility reflexology. Again, there is no science to back it up but she says: "It primes and prepares the body to be in tip-top condition so that must help.

"It is lovely to see the benefits to the mums. When mum is happy then the house is happy."

For more information contact Zoe on 01362 851819 or visit her website www.toptotoemassage.co.uk