A new study will help military dads connect with their babies through infant massage.

After a two-and-a-half-year process of paperwork and patience, Vonda Jump, senior researcher at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, will soon begin a two-year research project funded by the Department of Defense. The project is titled, “Training Military Staff to Promote Servicemember Well-being Through Infant Massage.”

The study will take place on five military installations, still to be determined by the Department of Defense. The first part of the study will teach military parenting support staff how to teach infant massage to parents. After the support staff is trained, the research portion of the project will begin.

The project will enroll 60 dads and their babies at each site. Half will be taught how to do infant massage, and the other half will go through ‘daddy boot camp,’ an activity where dad and baby learn exercises to promote physical contact between them. Five to six dads will attend each class. Moms will be welcome to attend, Jump said, but won’t be allowed to take over the activities.

“We’ll be looking at the differences between how the two groups interact with their babies,” Jump said. “The hypothesis is that infant massage will help promote communication with their babies.”

Jump also said there are a lot of dads coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan who have seen terrible things, so they keep their babies and their wives at arm’s length.

“They don’t want to ‘contaminate’ them,” Jump said. “We’re hoping with massage, dads will begin to connect with the babies.”

She said there is some concern that the experience could bring negative things to the surface for the dads, and researchers will pay close attention to that.

The dad-baby pairs will be recorded on video and assessed before and after the infant massage training or daddy boot camp, and then again when infants are 12 months old to determine attachment security.

According to Jump, past studies involving infant massage have found that massage is more effective than rocking to get babies to sleep, in promoting attachment security, and in improving symptoms of depression. Jump anticipates that dads will learn that fathers in both groups will find the experience enjoyable and will improve their interactions with their infants.