

## Touch—A Touchy Subject

The skin is the largest organ in our bodies and it's responsible for the sense of touch. Our first experience with touch as an infant is the initial step in developing healthy coping skills to deal with distress. In the 1960's Harry Harlow, an American Psychologist, conducted the famous surrogate mom experiment that confirmed our primitive drives to seek comfort through touch. Baby rhesus monkeys were given a choice between a surrogate mother that was made out of wire but which had a nipple for feeding or a surrogate that was covered in terrycloth with no opportunity to feed. The baby monkeys consistently spent time clinging to the terrycloth mom. Food was not the driving force for the bond between a mother and child; comfort is needed for growth and development. Touch is the catalyst for the release of the hormone oxytocin, which is known for its calming and pair bonding effects. Touch is also linked with positive physical and social development. Premature infants have been shown to benefit from receiving an increased amount of physical contact from their parents. A study in Sweden showed that preschool children who received 15-minutes of daily massage showed a decrease in aggressive behaviours.

Touch in our families is decreasing, as children are receiving more of their care outside of the family system at a younger age. In hunter-gatherer societies, the ratio of adults to children was 4:1, whereas our current standards are around 1:5. Therefore, there are less people attending to a single child combined with less physicality that naturally comes from a nonfamilial member. Currently, the media is quick to highlight the damaging effects of harmful touch. This negative attention has created a vast societal need to protect our children; therefore many new rules and regulations have emerged in environments that provide care and education to children. Touch can bring great benefits or harm to a child, depending on how it is used in a relationship.

Touch is an important part of how we connect to the people we have close relationships with. We need to be connected to one another on a visceral level to help foster our attachments. As adults, we need to be aware of how we use touch and be respectful of a child's need for touch. Some children have greater needs than others. It is our job as caregivers to be attuned to what the child needs, not what we need. This is especially true when caring for a child who has experienced the misuse of touch; that child's recovery must include an appropriate and positive use of touch. There is an amazing amount of biology that goes on when we hug, kiss, and hold our children. What I believe is most important are the positive benefits that appropriate touch can bring into our relationships. Responding to distress with a loving touch helps teach our bodies and brains a healthy way to deal with distress and strengthens our relational bonds. Strong relationships and coping skills is something we all want our children to have, so they can pass them on to their children someday.

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