

Essential Touch

Meeting the Needs of Young Children

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About This Book

Acknowledging my own comfort level with touch has been a critical factor in my relationships with others because I am not a “touchy-feely” person. Yet when I think of the times in my life when I felt most comforted and most loved, those moments involved touch. Some of those times were when I was 4 years old and curled up in a blanket on my mama’s lap, when a nurse named Ruby held my hand continuously during an intense labor with my third child, and when a colleague hugged me without saying a word when he heard my sister had died. Touch communicates as nothing else can, and it is irreplaceable in our lives and in our classrooms. It is that idea that motivates me as an early childhood educator, and it was the primary motivation for my writing this book.

Chapter One introduces the concepts of touch and sets the context for later chapters. **Chapter Two** examines the many, powerful ways that touch and touch experiences affect young children physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally, as well as the therapeutic benefits of human touch. **Chapter Three** paints a picture of a developmentally appropriate early childhood program where touch is a critical pedagogical element. A “touch curriculum” is outlined in **Chapter Four**, describing what children should learn about body awareness, healthy sexuality, and body ownership as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Policies and programs that can safeguard both children from sexual abuse and caregivers from allegations of inappropriate touching are addressed in **Chapter Five**. And finally, **Chapter Six** focuses on children with touch-related special needs. The **References** and **Resources** sections offer lists of books on touch for educators and for young children, as well as some useful Web sites. Additional practical resources for educators, such as sample staff and family handbook policies, are provided in the **Appendixes**.

Taking a Look at Touch

The uterine contractions of labor constitute the beginning caressing of the baby. (Montagu 1986: 68)

So important is the role of touch that our lives begin with it. Its importance continues into early childhood, as one of the primary senses through which preverbal infants and toddlers relate to the world, and it continues to play a role in older children's development and learning. In the early childhood setting, touch is about *physical contact* between children and their caregivers and peers, and about providing young children with *tactile experiences* of the world around them. Both kinds of touch are absolutely essential. So it is critical that those who work in settings where children spend so much time meet their needs for touch, and in ways that are educational, appropriate, respectful, and nurturing.

Creating a learning environment rich with opportunities to experience and experiment with tactile sensations is something most teachers of young children are comfortable with and do routinely in their programs. Children

feel objects of different shapes and textures; they push, pull, lift, squeeze, and toss things; they put their hands in water and sand. It's the other kind of touch where things get complicated.

For the past 20 years, the trend toward abstaining from touch in schools has been growing in direct response to the growth in sensitivity toward the problems of sexual harassment, molestation, and abuse. In an effort to keep one step ahead of sexual offenders, more and more schools are sending the message to adults—hands off! . . . Touching children in schools has become virtually taboo. (Del Prete 1997: 59)

Many early childhood educators are confused and ambivalent about the touch connection with children. They hate the idea of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, especially, spending their days without the nurture and stimulation of human contact. Yet they worry about how to protect the children and themselves in a climate of concern about abuse. Living in a relatively “low-touch” culture, many Americans have found minimal-touch and no-touch policies more palatable than might be the case in a country where continuous skin-to-skin contact between young children and their caregivers is the norm from birth (Small 1998). And the belief that somehow too much touch will spoil a child also keeps young children from receiving sufficient physical contact.

But when it comes to how much and what types of physical contact belong in early childhood programs, research and practical wisdom offer a clear answer: Young children need positive human touch, and lots of it, in all its forms—carrying, swinging, rolling, holding, a backrub, a hug, a pat, a high-five, rough-and-tumble play, even massage. Nurturing touch from their caregivers is essential for children to feel loved and secure; interactions with their peers help develop social and emotional competence.

Moreover, teachers must understand that withholding touch can be just as physically and emotionally harmful to a child as sexual abuse or physical abuse such as hitting, grabbing, spanking, and shaking. When children of any age are denied touch or when they experience it only in the context of aggression or punishment, they are deprived of the nurturing environment they need to thrive and grow. They also will lack experiences to prepare them to discern touch that is loving and appropriate from touch that is dangerous and inappropriate—and thus they are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Early childhood teachers and directors very much want to create nurturing environments for children and are eager to receive guidance and support to help them so. This book is for them and the children they care for.