

The Importance and Power of Physical Touch

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Of all the human senses, touch is the social sense—the sense that most powerfully invites us into relationship with each other. Think about it: We manifest friendly intentions by touching the stranger in greeting; we comfort our children by holding them in our arms; we soothe the sick by reaching out for their hand; we celebrate success by enthusiastically giving each other “high fives.” Simple acts of touch like these connect us to each other in ways that go beyond what is possible with words alone.

We humans, it turns out, are made for touching. We are covered with skin, not a hard shell. In fact, each of us has roughly 18 square feet of skin embedded with five million nerve endings, each ready to be triggered by touch. This skin of ours is there for relationship. It allows us to experience and receive the world. Indeed, if touch didn't feel good, there would be no sex, no mothering, no fathering, no species, no survival!

Nonetheless, there is a great deal of ambivalence around touching in America today. From an early age, children hear the message, “Don't touch!” This remonstrance comes in many forms—Don't touch the stove! Be careful not to touch that bug! Don't touch your privates. Prohibitions surrounding touch are particularly emphatic in our schools where touch is often associated with sexual harassment. For both teachers and students alike, the message is clear: Keep your hands to yourself!

So it is that school activities that involve touch are often dismissed, disparagingly, as “touchy-feely.” When this happens in my own classroom, I remind my students that we humans are, by nature, “touchy-feely” creatures and to deny this is to ignore our biological essence.

Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that human touch is essential to human survival and well being. We know, for example, that babies who are denied touch fail to thrive and often die. Touch is also important to the wellbeing of adults, particularly during serious illnesses. Consider: The fluttering heartbeat of coronary patients in intensive care units calms down, becoming more regular, when a nurse holds the patient's hand to take his/her pulse, only to revert to an abnormal state when the nurse leaves.

Studies on animals also point to a fundamental connection between touch and well being. For example, lab animals provided with regular treatments of stroking and petting develop larger brains, stronger muscles and bones, and more effective immune systems compared to lab animals deprived of touch when young.

Holding all this in mind, it may very well be that the antisocial behavior evidenced among kids today—including precocious sexual activity, eating disorders, episodes of violence, and depression—would diminish significantly if children received a steady diet of loving touch both at home and in school. In this vein, Tiffany Fields (author of the book, Touch) reports that when adolescents with a history of aggressive behavior were given regular massages, their level of both anxiety and aggression declined. Furthermore, Fields cites studies showing that regular massage can reduce the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder, enabling a hyperactive child to concentrate better. Finally, there is even evidence to suggest that the right kind of touch can help children with autism to relate better to parents and teachers.

While touch is being increasingly discouraged in our schools, outside of schools there is a growing recognition of the power of touch to heal both physical and emotional ailment. So it is that Americans today, in record numbers, are seeking Massage therapists, Rolfing specialists,

Therapeutic Touch experts, Quantum Touch practitioners, along with other body-based professionals.

With exploration and courage, all of us—young and old, teachers and parents—can reclaim our birthright to enjoy the healing, nurturing, regenerative potential of touch; and, in so doing, we might stand with Walt Whitman in saying:

Touch me,

Touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,

Be not afraid of my body.