

Deepening Parent-Child Relationships through Loving Touch



We tend to recognize the fact that babies need lots of loving touches. We hold them against our skin. We carry them next to our heart. We soothe them by gently smoothing their hair

or massaging their tiny hands and feet. But as they grow, we may not consider how often we touch, how we touch, and the importance of touch.

In fact, there's research that shows that positive touch can have powerful effects and those findings have significant implications for family life. Touch can deepen intimacy in any relationship creating safety and trust and a sense of well-being. It offers health benefits as well. A study found that those who hugged more were more resistant to colds and other stress-induced illnesses. ¹ They found that the support felt particularly through caring touch helped boost immunity. Another study measured the brain activity of participants who were lying in an fMRI scanner anticipating a blast of loud white noise. Those who experienced it alone showed that the regions in the brain that are responsible for threat and stress were highly activated. But the participants who had their romantic partner alongside them stroking their arm didn't show a threat or stress reaction at all. ² As we assist our kids in dealing with the day-to-day stressors of life, touch needs to be on our radar as a strategy that works.

In previous generations, touch was limited since there were worries too much might spoil a child. My Mom recalls reading about the importance of touch and holding babies in the early 1970s when she was raising me while she feverishly read the only parenting guide available at that time, Dr.

Spock's "Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care" that sold over 50 million copies. Her mother had been advised to keep her distance. And because my mother wasn't held or touched much as a child, it felt unnatural to her as a Mom. Yet she knew it was important to me. So she made a daily hug a part of our routine. And I certainly benefitted from the love and closeness we maintain to this day.



Teachers have long used touch as a way to redirect students who are daydreaming or off task. A simple touch on the shoulder can be enough to help a wandering mind focus on the present. Parents can use this as well. Instead of correcting a misstep your child knows she's not supposed to be engaged in, try a shoulder touch instead and see if you might communicate through touch alone.

Touch can also be a direct communicator of emotions. In fact, researchers tested this theory with an interesting experiment. They had a participant put his arm through a hole in a wall so that the other interacting participant could only see his arm. The one extending his arm was asked to communicate emotion only through his hand. And the other

had to guess the emotion. Though there were gender differences (men interpreted men with greater accuracy and women interpreted women with greater accuracy), the guessed emotions for the same gender were up to 78% accurate. 3 Can you tell what your partner or child is feeling just by touching his hand? It could be fun to try!

Kindergartners need hugs just as much as third graders, eighth graders, and those tall Juniors in high school do. Here are some ways to incorporate loving touch into your daily family routine for the benefit of all.

Create a routine time for hugs. Perhaps you already initiate hugs before you go off on your separate ways in the morning and before bed at night. Think about the routines throughout the day in which you see your family members – morning, after school, homework, sports practice, dinner, bedtime? Begin inserting a regular hug into one or more of those times and it will become an expected part of your routine. I counted up my routine hugs with my son and we hug in each of the major transitions of the day. I know that benefits my well-being just as much as his. Try it!

Find snuggle time. Instead of relegating yourselves to different chairs during movie watching time, why not snuggle together under one big blanket? Or snuggle while reading together before bedtime? It will set the tone for a good night's sleep.

Initiate a quick homework massage. Athletes get massages to work out their tired muscles and help them relax in between games. Homework can be a stressful time for kids. They may be anticipating challenges and can feel frustrated by difficult assignments. Giving a quick shoulder massage before or during homework time can help ease the tension and may even speed up homework completion!

Reward with hugs instead of candy. So often we use candy in celebration. And though kids would never write down a hope for your love and attention on a holiday wish list, they appreciate it and benefit from it more than a whole store of candy. Shower your love with hugs when you are celebrating positive choices.



Perhaps, use Valentine's Day to kick off your very own hug campaign in your family to make sure you are getting your one-a-day despite family schedules. A snuggle before bedtime, a touch on the arm while playing, or a shoulder massage while getting through

homework are all ways you use touch to promote trusting

relationships and offer the benefits of well-being that come with it.

Happy Valentine's Day!

References:

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