

## Importance of Touch

Today's young children are experiencing a different world. Technology gadgets, media, and hectic schedules with many activities have changed the preschool years. Such a lifestyle may add to the disconnect of nurturing experiences, where comforting relationships are formed and positive physical interactions occur, such as slowing down and reading a book in the lap of a caring adult or holding hands while going for a walk.

Yet, even with today's fast-paced world, you know the power of a nurturing touch. If you pick up your preschooler, the crying will stop. Simple touching acts such as giving a backrub, holding hands, sharing a hug, putting your arm around a shoulder, or ruffling your child's hair give you a non-verbal way to show your love to your preschooler.

### Benefits of Touch

Touch Research Institute studies show touch therapy and massage have many benefits. Benefits include enhanced attentiveness, decrease in depression symptoms, reduced pain, reduction in stress hormones, and improved immune functioning. Findings of some selected studies include:

- Preschoolers falling asleep sooner and sleeping longer during naptime.
- Lowered anxiety and improved control of children's asthma.
- Improved behavior for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

- More on-task and social relatedness behavior for children with autism.
- Less touch aversion and withdrawal for children with autism.
- Children's attitude and activity levels improved and parent's anxiety decreased for children with dermatitis.
- Glucose levels decreased and dietary compliance increased for children with diabetes.

Everyday touching--physical contact with others--is valuable and a critical component of healthy development for all children. Touch is important for building healthy attachments to parents and other caregivers. Healthy attachment is important for learning how to relate to others.

Touch reduces stress and supports brain development. High stress hormone levels in the brain have been found to delay cognitive development as well as other developmental areas. Positive, appropriate touch may lead to greater mental and physical development in children.



## Communicating by Touch

Touch is a form of non-verbal communication. It often communicates more than words. Three pro-social emotions—love, gratitude, and sympathy—can be readily communicated with touch. Children who learn to communicate these emotions, including through touch, are more likely to be cooperative in their interactions with others. Help your child learn to communicate emotions through touch. How do you show these emotions to others through touch?

Emotion	Examples
Love	Give a hug Hold hands Share a kiss Other?
Gratitude	Give a hug Shake a hand Arm around shoulder Other?
Sympathy	Give a hug Hold an arm Arm around shoulder Other?

When your child is hurt and crying—regardless if the upset is about the death of a pet or a spat with a friend, show your compassion with physical touch. Your modeling of how to show comfort to others through touch teaches your child.

## No-touch Policies

Some programs (child care, preschools, schools, etc.) have instituted no-touch policies. Psychologist Sylvia Clare argues that no-touch policies are in themselves abusive. She points out that touch "...is an intrinsic part of emotional literacy and intuitive wisdom, a kind of self-knowledge that shapes our ability to read situations and assess how to deal with them appropriately."

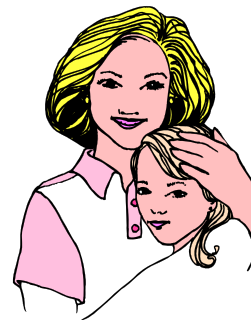
The experiences a child receives throughout their life shapes the way their brains develop. Children who do not receive sufficient

appropriate touch are unable to form important neural connections. This leads to their becoming desensitized. Such children, notes Clare, are likely to develop into people lacking in empathy, emotional warmth and the basic ability to engage in normal human adult relationships. They are also more vulnerable to contact involving inappropriate touching because they lack positive touching experiences.

## Use Touch to Guide Your Child

If your preschooler is losing self-control or misbehaving, move physically closer. In a warm and friendly way, put your arm around your child or touch your child's arm. Moving close to your child and touching your child may reduce the misbehavior.

When your preschooler is distressed, a touch on the back or shoulder or being held close is comforting and reassuring. Often a child who is out of control also can be calmed by being held firmly but gently.



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