

## 28.6 Touching Children – A risky Business?

*“Damned if you do, and damned if you don’t” may well characterise the feeling of teachers and carers with regard to the issue of touching children.*

Touch is powerful communication. Appropriate touch can enrich human interaction; inappropriate touch can destroy it.

The recent highly publicised Wood Royal Commission into Police Corruption in New South Wales, has thrown a spotlight on the issue of paedophilia, and the topic of teachers and other adult carers touching children and students, is exercising the minds of educators around Australia.

The challenge is not peculiar to Australia. An article on “hands-off” rules in Britain’s *The Times Educational Supplement* (11/5/90) entitled, “A touchy subject” crosses the same territory.

To touch or not to touch? The answer lies, I believe, between two extremes of a rather complex continuum. At one end is the notion that it is dangerous for centre/school adults to touch children in any circumstance. Prohibiting touching removes the likelihood of false allegations or misinterpreted intentions.

At the other end is indiscriminate touching with no regard to the needs and rights of individual children and students. An example of the latter would be the teacher who gives out hugs because he or she wants to, without considering the individual needs of each child.

Teachers and other adult carers have thousands of interactions with the students in their classes each day. What questions should they be asking themselves about whether or not they touch a child? What are the rights of young people to be touched or not touched?

What is appropriate and inappropriate touch?

Many adults touch children (and other adults) with no ill intent whatsoever. They touch to provide comfort and support, to acknowledge achievement, to give direction and instruction, and to provide safety in particular curriculum areas such as health and physical education. However, how many adults seek permission from a child before they touch? Ask yourself, “*Why am I about to touch this child? Is it to meet my needs or the child’s? How do I know?*”

One could guess that most times when children are physically hurt they would appreciate a comforting arm around their shoulder (unless they have dislocated it) or a touch on their hand. However, how they feel about it may also depend on factors like the sex of the adult, the age of the child, whether or not the child knows and trusts this person, cultural considerations and family background.

Young children are more often involved in more affectionate touching relationships with their teachers and carers than older children. How many young children have given their teacher a neck massage whilst the teacher read the class a story?

High school teachers and pubescent teenagers are not normally involved in similar touching relationships.

Adults entrusted with the care and education of children cannot make assumptions. We need to develop a habit of asking permission from children before touching. For example, ask a child who is hurt if they would like a comforting hug or not. It's quite easy really and shows respect for the child.

Should schools invoke a total ban on teachers touching children? I believe this would be a backward step and quite draconian.

However, clear guidelines should be formulated at the local school community level in close consultation with staff, students and parents. The issue needs to be opened up for debate and discussion made.

Some would say the decision as to whether you touch children or not involves just common sense and a bit of nous. However, inappropriate touch still causes problems in education systems.

Decisions about touching need to be viewed in the context of risk reduction for both teachers and children. Everyone needs to be clear about where on the body it is appropriate to touch children and under what circumstances. Children need to be taught how to recognise the difference between touch that most people would consider appropriate and touch that is inappropriate, and in many cases, illegal.

This teaching needs to be explicit, with concrete examples. We cannot rely on abstract notions of confusing and uncomfortable touch any more, particularly with our youngest and most vulnerable children. We need to teach them about their rights of body ownership and their clear right not to be touched in any circumstance if they don't want to be.

This needs to be balanced by two things: the need for negotiation to allow some adults to touch them for medical instructional and safety reasons, and secondly, children's own responsibility not to infringe on the rights of others.

Teaching children about these topics needs to be done in the context of well planned, sequential and developmentally appropriate protective behaviours and sexuality education programs. One-off sessions are relatively ineffectual, out of context and are more likely to raise anxiety levels.

Teachers need to consider how well they know their children or students. Some will be quite comfortable with the appreciative pat on the head or touch on the hand. Others will not.

Find this out before you even consider touching someone. This is both respectful and safer. Learn to recognise body language that gives clear, 'DO NOT TOUCH' messages, such as children or students who shy away from touch.

In physical education, for example, physically handling students to demonstrate a particular action such as throwing a javelin or a ball may seem quite reasonable. However, adults need to think carefully of the advantages of seeking permission from a child before performing the particular demonstration.

We cannot assume the child wants to be touched to be shown a particular action. Children and students need to know why there is a need to demonstrate using a hands on method. Adults need to explain what the touching will involve and most importantly, ask for volunteers, or ask if students mind being shown using a hands-on approach.

Children need to be taught how to deal with unwanted touch. Sexual harassment grievance procedures need to be regularly affirmed. We need to give children explicit permission to tell adults they don't want a hug or a pat on the head and adults need to learn to respect this.

Inappropriate sexual touching is often surrounded by secrecy and threats. We need to teach children how to discriminate between secrets that can be kept and those that need to be told. Children need to be taught that touching secrets need to be told.

The Protective Behaviours program provides children with a range of strategies to support this, particularly the establishment and maintenance of networks of trusted adults.

Schools and teachers need to give careful consideration to the issue of adults being alone with a student one on one. I remember as a first year teacher being told at a staff meeting about the dangers of this practice, particularly for male teacher with female students.

However, regardless of the sex of the adult and child/student, how can schools balance student needs and confidentiality with teacher and student safety?

School counsellors, I believe are particularly at risk as much of their work involves one to one interactions often with students who are experiencing stress and trauma. Counsellors put themselves at risk of false allegations if they are alone with students. If a child alleges inappropriate touching occurred while alone with them, counsellors may find themselves accused of a serious criminal offence and dealing with the associated action and distress this entails.

Schools need to consider how to reduce the risk of this happening. Student counsellors should not be put in a position of being alone with students. They need to be provided with a room that allows for visual contact with other adults whilst still retaining the confidentiality of conversation. The cost of not doing this could well be someone's career.

We already have clear policy guidelines about not touching children and students when managing their behaviour. Corporal punishment is banned in state schools. Guidelines will soon be released concerning the physical restraint of children and students in relation to duty of care and the safety of others.

There are guidelines for manual handling of students with physical disabilities to ensure they are lifted and moved in a manner that is both safe and respectful. So, why not develop school based guidelines about friendly touching to protect the rights and safety of both children and staff?

Should teachers stop all friendly touch with children/students? No, but teachers need to make informed decisions about touching children/students in a friendly way that minimises the risk to both parties.

You cannot remove the risk completely, but it would be a very sad day if a school or education system were to put a ban on touch, a most powerful tool of communication. In the long run such restrictions would be unrealistic and detrimental. As Professor Richard Whitfield, chairman of the National Family Trust in the United Kingdom, one said, "*Not to communicate – to stay silent, not to touch or give any signals is not to relate; while not to relate is a very significant sense, not to be human.*"

Taken from *The Times Educational Supplement*, 11/5/90, 'A touchy subject'.

Let the debate begin in centres and schools so that school community guidelines around 'friendly' touching can lead to informed decisions that protect everybody's rights!

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