



A Better Way

The Importance of Healthy Childhood Physical Affection and the Dangers of Inappropriate Touch

By Roxane Lewis, 2020

As parents, we sometimes focus so much on our children's spiritual health that we lose sight of the role emotional and mental health play in a healthy spiritual life. All aspects of our children's lives have to be in balance, and there is very little chance of our children being healthy and happy if we do not support all of these areas equally.

One area that does not get the attention it deserves is the importance of healthy physical interaction with our children. There are many reasons this topic gets ignored, or even actively avoided altogether. We as parents may be afraid that we are being inappropriate or crossing a line, or may not know where to begin because we weren't shown loving physical affection while we were growing up.

We can't teach if we haven't been taught. We are all quite familiar with the concept of "spare the rod and spoil the child," drawn from Proverbs, but are sadly unfamiliar with the concept of "his father saw him and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." (Luke 15:20, KJV) This article will explore the absolute necessity of healthy, loving interaction, and the dangers of inappropriate and abusive unhealthy interaction.

Before we tackle the negative aspect of harmful touch, let's discuss why positive touch is crucial to our

children. In the Bible, we find the story of the children who wanted to meet Jesus. When the disciples tried to turn the children away, Jesus reprimanded them. He called the children to Him, and the Bible tells us that "He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them." (Mark 10:16, KJV) He did not just speak blessings over them, He physically *took them up in His arms*.

We are all children of God. The writer of the Song of Solomon says "His left hand is under my head, and His right hand doth embrace me." (Song of Solomon 2:6, KJV). If Jesus and our Father God specifically use physical touch as a means to show us support, love, and blessing, shouldn't we do the same for our children?

It is a proven medical and psychological fact that healthy, loving physical affection is a basic human necessity. Healthy touch has been proven to reduce stress hormones, activate touch sensors, improve mood, and helps prevent depression. We need to acknowledge our children's feelings verbally, but we need to incorporate the healing the power of touch support as well¹.

The health benefits of touch also include improved mental and emotional development, a lowered risk of Alzheimer's disease, a stronger immune system, and a stronger sense of self-esteem and self-worth².

Initiating supportive healthy touch is a vol-

untary action. When you put your arm around your child and give them a squeeze, hug them when they are feeling down, or high five them when they do a good job, you are making an active choice to support them emotionally through physical touch. Your child may not consciously recognize this as a choice, but subconsciously they will identify that touch as you making a choice to show them love and support³.

But there is one other thing we need to keep in mind. While positive touch is healthy, there are times our children may not want to be touched. If you attempt to hug your child, and they pull away because they are upset about something, it is very important to honor their personal space. If you force the touch, that turns what was meant to be positive support into a negative experience⁴.

As much as we would like to think all parents know what is healthy and what is not, that is not always the case. We would love for this article to be all about the “do’s”, but unfortunately, we cannot run from the “don’ts.” Here at A Better Way, we receive stories of shockingly horrible inappropriate parental/child physical interaction on a far too frequent basis. These stories outline cases of gross sexual misconduct under the guise of “innocent fun”, and stories of lifetime damage being inflicted on innocent children due to lack of basic parental sexual education.

We have received first-hand accounts of a father holding his daughter tightly and forcing her to kiss him deeply (French kissing); a mother who would reach under her daughter’s dresses and pinch their vaginas when playing tag with them or putting them down for a nap; young mothers in the church discussing stimulating their infant son’s penises when changing their diapers because they think “the reaction is funny”; and children who are regularly spanked on their bare bottoms⁵.

Everyone is born with receptors in the brain that are affected by the hormones produced by sexual stimulation. Forcibly activating these receptors in young children has the potential to damage them for life. The brain is not prepared to correctly process those hormones, and it causes changes in the brain that cannot be undone. Children who are exposed to sexual stimulation through abuse will suffer life-long repercussions.

The brain interprets those hormones as dangerous, and floods the system with stress hormones. This in turn activates the “fight or flight” response.

Because a young child rarely has the option to act on that response and cannot actively choose to flee or fight, they feel trapped. This leads to crippling fear and anxiety. Since the child already feels unsafe, they rarely express those feelings. The longer that reflex is triggered, the more permanently the brain changes. This leads to long-term anxiety, depression, disproportionate aggression or fear and ultimately, post-traumatic stress disorder⁶.

Early exposure to abuse of *any* kind has a lasting effect on the developing brain, primarily on the dopamine receptors. These are the receptors that allow the brain to process feelings of joy, peace, safety, and the great majority of positive hormones. Because of this, the brain cannot absorb these positive emotions, and is overwhelmed with the negative hormones. This intensifies feelings of loneliness, anger, and depression and increases the chance of suicidal thoughts or actions. A child who has been exposed to these stress hormones before the age of five is 76% more likely to develop a drug or alcohol addiction in an attempt to create those positive hormones in the brain. This becomes a vicious cycle. The use of drugs and excessive alcohol creates more cell death, while the cravings in the brain become even stronger⁷.

Again, we are referring to *forcible* abuse of all kinds, including sexual abuse. This should not be confused with a child’s natural curiosity about their body. It is completely normal for young children to explore their body, including masturbation. There is no danger in masturbation on the developing brain. In fact, masturbation and self-stimulation are normal, healthy ways for a child to learn healthy sexual behavior⁸.

Spanking a bare bottom is a very insidious form of sexual abuse. Do children need discipline? Absolutely. We could make a very strong, medically-based argument against spanking altogether⁹, but bare bottom spanking is unhealthy on an entirely different level.

Even a young child has natural privacy regarding someone forcing them to show their genitals. We teach our children not to let others see their private parts—and then we completely contradict that by forc-

ing them to expose their private parts during spanking. This creates confusion and humiliation, and also makes it more likely that a child will submit to future sexual abuse from an authority figure. It reinforces the concept that an authority figure can punish them with their private parts exposed, so it must be ok that anyone in authority has the right to touch a private part.

There is *no* reason a spanking must be on a bare bottom. *None*. Spanking is meant to be a form of discipline, but insisting on unnecessary nudity during a spanking introduces a violent sexual component that will create lasting negative trauma. Spanking a bare bottom is *never* ok, and *is* a form of sexual abuse and assault¹⁰. This is a topic we are going to explore further in future articles.

We want our children to have the best, happiest lives that they possibly can. A child who has very little to no positive physical support may well struggle with feeling disconnected and unloved. Then consider a child who not only does not receive positive physical support, but also experiences abuse- these children are set to fail before they have a chance to comprehend what a happy, healthy life even should be.

As parents, we have the God-given task of not only helping our children to survive, but helping them flourish. Incorporating healthy touch and protecting them from unhealthy touch is a very necessary step in helping our children to flourish and grow into happy, healthy adults.

Endnotes

- 1 The Importance of Touch. <https://www.todayparent.com/family/the-importance-of-touch/>
- 2 Cicchetti, D., Rogosch, F., Gunnar, M., & Toth, S. (2010, January 28). The Differential Impacts of Early Physical and Sexual Abuse and Internalizing Problems on Daytime Cortisol Rhythm in School-Aged Children. US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2846099/>
- 3 The Importance of Touch. <https://www.todayparent.com/family/the-importance-of-touch/>
- 4 Personal and Physical Space. <https://www.healingmindsandhearts.com/2011/04/29/respecting-kids-personal-and-physical-space-part-one-of-series-on-body-spacefreedom-of-movement/>
- 5 Permission was received to use these specific examples in this article.
- 6 Stress and the Developing Brain: Overwhelming stress and young children — National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. https://www.ecmhc.org/tutorials/trauma/mod2_3.html
- 7 Chichetti et al.
- 8 Masturbation in Preschoolers. <https://hhma.org/healthadvisor/pa-bmasturb-hhg/>
- 9 The Case Against Spanking. www.apa.org/monitor/2012/04/spanking
- 10 Spanking: A Case For Sexual Assault. <https://www.child-abuse-effects.com/spanking-a-case-for-sexual-assault.html>

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