Keeping the Caring Touch in Early Childhood

Research demonstrates that children need responsive care and opportunities to build healthy attachments to their caregivers. It's difficult to imagine responsive care without holding an infant, rocking a toddler, or graciously accepting the good-morning hug from a happy three-year-old. Physical contact with others is valuable and a critical component of healthy development, but may be missing or misunderstood in many early childhood programs.

Think about your day with children and the times you offer touch. It may be helping to put a coat on or changing a diaper. It may be holding a child to help him calm down and to show you care. It may be helping a child climb the ladder to the slide. It may be a gentle hand on the shoulders of two children working out a problem. Touch is intentional in our work. It assists our mission of offering quality, nurturing, responsive experiences to support learning and provide happy childcare experiences.

Yet some programs discourage staff from offering touch to young children. Sometimes it is believed that to prepare children for elementary school, caregivers need to be more firm and detached. More often it is because programs want to protect staff from allegations of inappropriate touch or child abuse.

“Programs should not institute ‘no-touch policies’ to reduce the risk of abuse. In the wake of well-publicized allegations of child abuse in out-of-home settings and increased concerns regarding liability, some programs have instituted such policies, either explicitly or implicitly. No-touch policies are misguided efforts that fail to recognize the importance of touch to children’s healthy development. Touch is especially important for infants and toddlers. Warm, responsive touches convey regard and concern for children of any age.”

– Prevention of Child Abuse in Early Childhood Programs and the Responsibilities of Early Childhood Professionals to Prevent Child Abuse, NAEYC Position Statement

Touch practices and policies for early care and education programs

Early educators and child care programs have a legal and ethical mandate to protect children in their care and also are expected to have an understanding of the benefits of appropriate, respectful touch and its critical role in healthy child development. Written policies and guidelines should be available for all early educators regarding touch, including child abuse prevention.

Policies provide clear information so there is no confusion about what may or may not be appropriate.

Written guidelines help staff to offer safe, healthy, appropriate, and supportive environments and interactions with children. Effective policies and practices for touch are designed to increase the use of positive touch, prevent the possibility of abuse, and inform families. Policies and practices should include guidelines for staff training on positive touch; educational activities to teach children about appropriate and inappropriate touch; safeguards to limit allegations of abuse; parent information; and sharing policies, practices, and information on positive touch with families.
Professional development for positive touch approach

There are many professional development opportunities, as well as research-based information, that can help lay the foundation to incorporating healthy, appropriate touch and clearly outlined touch policies. Professional development should meet the needs of the program, the director, the staff, the children, and the families. Professional development topics regarding touch include:

- Current research on touch and its critical role in healthy child development, including childhood sexuality development.
- Reflecting on personal feelings regarding touch.
- Methods for communicating with families about touch (sharing policy, philosophy, and ideas regarding touch).
- Activities and approaches for teaching children skills in identifying and implementing appropriate touch.

Program safeguards

To help protect staff from accusations of child abuse, programs can incorporate safeguards that minimize risk. Some safeguards that can be implemented are:

- Obtain all required reference information and background checks for adults working with children.
- Review touch policies and prevention of child abuse policies annually.
- Train staff in recognizing and reporting child abuse and neglect and review information and procedures periodically.
- Maintain staffing patterns so that staff are not left alone with a group of children.
- Develop a definition for positive touch - Frances Carlson (Essential Touch: Meeting the Needs of Young Children, 2006) shares a possible measure: "In general, when deciding whether a touch is or is not appropriate, use the Touch Test: Ask yourself whether the touch would be appropriate if given to a stranger." Carlson also shares touching only non-vulnerable body parts, such as the shoulders, back, arms, and hands.

Resources


For more information on why touch is important for young children, read the “Touch – Why We Need It” tip page. (http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/TIPS/TIPS1410.pdf)

For ideas on teaching young children about touch, read the “Teaching Children about Positive Touch” tip page. (http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/TIPS/TIPS1410.pdf)

References:

- The Touch Research Institute www.miami.edu/touch-research