Teaching Children about Positive Touch

Touch is a means of learning for children. From the very early stages of life touch conveys communication and discovery. Teaching and providing children appropriate touch is a responsibility of early educators. Valuable information can be found to assist teaching children about appropriate touch through the use of research, self-reflection, and intentional planning.

Children go through developmental stages as they learn about their individual bodies and body awareness. When children learn about their bodies (identifying/labeling parts), body awareness (body functions and control), and body communication (what we do affects others and ourselves), they learn about self-regulation and the beginnings of independence and autonomy.

Learning about their bodies also helps children understand touch: how it is received, how it feels, and the many roles touch plays (soothing, helpful, nurturing, etc.). During this period of development, children learn not only about their bodies, but also that they have body ownership: a right to control how their body is touched. As children go through the stages of body awareness, they will learn to identify what is appropriate touch and what is not.

Intentional practices to teach children about appropriate touch and body awareness:

Sensory materials – Provide a variety of materials – based on age and development – that explore the senses and provide direct experiences for the senses, such as water play, pouring materials (rice, beans, water), play dough and clay, a variety of materials in different textures (cotton balls, feathers, sand paper), and musical instruments (drums, chimes, rhythm sticks).

Identifying body parts – Have safety mirrors where infants and toddlers can view themselves. Use posters and pictures that appropriately label bodies. Present books representing healthy body development. Puppets, dolls, and related props such as clothes, housekeeping items, and role-playing items encourage natural explorations.

Songs, games, and finger plays – Introduce actions that show control of voice, hands, or bodies, such as red light/green light for older children. Activities like this help children experiment with ways to control and use their bodies. Also, partner and group games can model and help practice appropriate interactions.

Self-help activities – Offer experiences where children learn to care for their bodies and their personal world, such as washing hands, hanging up coats, and self-toileting. Self-help brings awareness that the child is in control, capable, and that their actions are helping them. Give feedback: “You are really scrubbing those germs off your hands and getting them clean. How does the water feel?”

Role play – Using dolls and toy figures can help in identifying appropriate ways to touch others as well as help very young children label and identify body parts. Dolls invite the practice of real-life experiences and nurturing care. Older toddlers and preschoolers can practice problem solving and taking on different roles.

Sensory environments – Early childhood environments should be filled with a balance of interesting and stimulating materials that engage all the senses. Be aware of how children respond to materials and activities to help in balancing what is added or what is removed. Environments should support a “please touch” motto, not a “don’t touch” motto.

Be aware of children with special needs that directly relate to touch. For some children, touch may be an unpleasant experience or difficult to process. Work with families and trained specialists to meet children’s needs.
Intentional language

Use language and discussion as opportunities to encourage reflection for children regarding touch. If a child pulls away when another child wants to hold their hand to do a song, ask them if it because they don’t want to participate or that they don’t like holding hands. If it’s holding hands that is uncomfortable, discuss why. Respect children’s preferences for touch. Ask children if they would like a hug or give them a choice of holding their hand, fingers, or wrist when walking with them.

With infants, describing situations verbally helps connect the touch experience to language, such as, “There’s applesauce on your nose--I’m going to wipe your face with the wet, cool wash cloth.” This brings awareness to sensations and actions. As children develop and grow, adults can continue to provide language and modeling, but it should shift from being described by the adult to being described by the child.

Help preschool children learn that they can express their ideas about touch, such as comfort level and boundaries. This helps foster their sense of body ownership, what they are comfortable with, and what they need. Offer children phrases to use:

- “Please stop.”
- “I don’t like it when you touch my hair.”
- “Will you hold my hand? I’m afraid.”

For more information on why positive touch is important for young children, read the “Touch – Why We Need It” tip page. (http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/TIPS/TIPS1411.pdf)

For information about preparing program policies on positive touch, read the “Keeping the Caring Touch in Early Childhood” tip page. (http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/TIPS/TIPS1409.pdf)

Resources:


References:

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

An ONLINE program of the College of Agricultural Sciences
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