

Out of Touch: Is it Worth the Cost?

By: Matthew J. Hertenstein

Headlines from the last few years of clergy and teachers who sexually exploit children fuel the fire against the use of touch in our places of worship, schools, and society in general. Despite the fact that scientists are discovering the powerful effects that touch has on our physiology and behavior, we touch each other preciously little. With the exception of touching our closest friends and family, our society has placed significant proscriptions against touch making the U.S. one of the lowest contact cultures in the world. Simply put: Touch is taboo and this has a detrimental effect on our lives.

Across the country, schools are implementing state-mandated “No Touch” policies that not only forbid teachers from touching students, but prohibit students from touching their peers. Take, for example, a mother who reported recently that the school disciplined her 5-year-old daughter for hugging a classmate because her grandmother died. It’s no longer acceptable in many schools for teachers to pat children on the back when praising them or to give a hug to elementary school children when sad. As the president of the National Education Association stated on the Oprah Winfrey show “Our slogan is, teach, don’t touch....In my classroom, we hug with our eyes.”

According to scientists, children are experiencing more stress today than in recent decades. Scientists also report, however, that touch reduces both physiological and perceived stress; touch causes one’s stress hormones, such as cortisol, to decrease while causing other hormones, like oxytocin, to increase which promote social bonding and wellness. Moreover, brain regions that are activated in anticipation of stressful events are attenuated when touched by another person. Recent studies also indicate that touch is capable of communicating distinct emotions such as love, gratitude and sympathy – just by a brief touch to the arm. Finally, studies have revealed that touch has the capacity to communicate security – something that is in low supply for many children.

In addition to schools, touch is discouraged in other spheres of life. Perhaps nowhere is the need for touch more clear than in neonatal intensive care units. According to a recent article published in *Pediatrics*, 1 of every 12 infants born is premature which puts these infants at risk for a number of serious medical conditions throughout their lives. Moreover, premature infants account for annual healthcare expenditures of \$5.8 billion. In a seminal study, premature infants who received touch three times a day for two weeks after birth weighed 47% more at the end of the study and came home six days sooner than infants who were not touched. One researcher calculated that if all eligible premature infants in the U.S. received regular touch in the hospital, \$4.7 billion could be saved annually.

Of course, our hesitancy to touch extends beyond our schools and hospitals. Parents in the U.S. provide significantly less touch to their children in everyday interaction than those in many other cultures in the world. Such non-touch behavior socializes our children to live a life “out of touch” with others. Many adults, especially those without

partners, experience lives of touch deprivation. Furthermore, at the end of life, many find themselves in nursing homes where, again, touch is in high demand, but in low supply.

Obviously, touch is not a panacea for all, or even some, of our ills. And, clearly, touch can be used inappropriately and have negative consequences. Prohibiting harmful types of touch such as sexual abuse are imperative, but we need to ask ourselves: What is the cost of forbidding or discouraging touch across so many domains of society? Given the overwhelming evidence that touch powerfully and positively regulates our physiology and behavior, the data suggest the cost is quite high.

About the Author: Matthew Hertenstein is a research psychologist at DePauw University and is co-editor of *The Handbook of Touch* to be published by Springer Publishing.