

Working with Touch

Touch is food, every bit as important as the food we put in our mouths. It prompts development at many levels. Without it, human beings become very sick. However, touch is also a 'touchy' subject in our culture, fraught with difficulty. For many very good reasons, professionals have become very careful about how they use touch. It is *always* essential to use touch with full awareness of the impact it may have.

In advocating an approach that may well include touch we recommend that practitioners are very clear about the role of touch in their work, so that they can articulate this to all those involved.

About Touch

Touch is the first sense that we acquire. More than any other of our senses it defines our sense of reality. 'Not only our geometry and our physics, but our whole conception of what exists outside us is based on the sense of touch'. (*Russell. The ABC of Relativity*)

Developmentally, we need to acquire awareness of what touches us and what we touch. Humans need to be able to interpret meaning from touch as well – from recognition of the feel of things, through to the ability to discriminate positive from negative touch. We gain these capacities by being involved in opportunities that involve touch and contact.

Reasons to include touch

Touch and learning

We touch with our skin. The skin is the largest, most varied and most constantly active source of sensation in the body. The skin is the interface between our body and the world, and the interface between our thought processes and our physical existence. The 'feel' of our skin and the 'feelings' in our minds are inextricably intertwined – what we 'feel' and what we 'feel about it' are often inseparable. By 'rubbing up against the world' we learn about ourselves, each other and the world we live in. The sensory activity of the skin is a major element in our development.

'The skin itself does not think, but its sensitivity is so great, combined with its ability to pick up and transmit so extraordinarily wide a variety of signals, and make so wide a range of responses, exceeding all other sense organs, for versatility it must be ranked second only to the brain itself'. (Montagu. Touching: The Human Significance of Skin)

Touch, health and wellbeing

Research shows that the connection between adequate touch stimulation and healthy physical development is unequivocal. Take babies away from their mothers, and deprive of them touch, and they become listless, apathetic and depressed. Even though they are fed, they fail to achieve normal weight. They suffer from increased respiratory infections and persistently develop fevers of unknown origin. All such abnormalities disappear when the infants are returned to their mothers, or are stimulated by touch.

The symptoms of sensory deprivation are strikingly similar to those of malnutrition. Touch is food to human beings. Appropriate touch is vital for wellbeing.

Touch and safeguarding

Movement , body work and touch can make some people feel very vulnerable. Even though touch is so important, it is only valuable when it feels safe, comfortable and positive. If, for a variety of reasons, it does not, all the benefits disappear, to be replaced by very clear disadvantages.

Touch must *always* be negotiated – probably non-verbally. Create an environment in which participants feel genuinely able to make choices based on how they feel:

- each person needs to feel in control of what they do, or what is done to them
- touch may become unacceptable at any time. It is never desirable to maintain touch if it has become unwelcome for any reason
- negotiate and support activities on a moment to moment basis and encourage anyone else working with you to do the same
- insist on this rule for any session: 'you can move in any way that you want as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, or you'
- stop, or change, what is happening at any time you feel uneasy about participants safety or comfort
- report anything that makes you uneasy to the appropriate person, within the safeguarding policy of your setting

Letting other people know about the touch in your work

As touch is such a touchy issue it is important that everyone, (from your manager to the families of people you work with), knows what you are doing and why. It may be important to list the kinds of movement that *may* be used: for instance,

- touch can be the focus for games and activities - gentle and boisterous
- partners may hold each other – for support, or as part of an activity
- you may use massage or touch to comfort
- there may be contact between a wide range of body parts, hands, feet, arms, back-to-back, side-to-side – but always with great attention to how appropriate it is in any given context and with each particular person.



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