

The Importance of Touch

• Laurie Clark

In my work as a Waldorf kindergarten teacher, I have tried to conscientiously strengthen and enhance the four foundational senses for the children in my care. In many of the classroom activities I try to make sure to incorporate movement, balance, and provide warmth and security for a sense of well-being. I have begun to question whether I have given the children enough opportunities in the sense of touch. The children knead dough, and they touch and play with various natural materials inside and outside, but is this enough? Are the children touched in an authentic, loving way each day by the teachers? I have tried to review the morning and find appropriate times where I could be affectionate in an authentic way, which can be very different for each child considering the needs and sensitivities that they bring. For one child it is enough to hold her hand when coming inside from play, while another child might need me to hold him on my lap with my arms around him in a gentle but firm touch.

Often the touch between children is aggressive, or because of various touch sensitivities could be perceived as unpleasant even though that intention was not there. I have begun to wonder if the children are given enough opportunities to gently touch one another. I decided to compose a circle that consciously promotes healthy touch through imaginations that require cooperation. Following this article, I offer this Circle Adventure called “Spring Cleaning” that provides and invites opportunities for healthy movement and touch between children.

In a book called *Essential Touch, Meeting the Needs of Young Children* by Frances Carlson, I found this quote: “For the past twenty years, the trend toward abstaining from touch in schools has been growing in direct response to the growth in sensitivity toward the problems of sexual harassment, molestation, and abuse. In an effort to keep one step ahead of sexual offenders, more and more schools are sending the message to adults—hands off! . . . Touching children in schools has

become virtually taboo” (Carlson, p. 3, quoted from Del Prete 1997).

This is a terrifying declaration in light of the needs of young children. Touch is a nurturing and necessary element in the life of the young child and brings with it a sense of security and emotional and social competence.

Touch begins in the birthing process when the contractions of labor “massage” the child as the journey down the birth canal is occurring. This experience wakes up the touch system in the baby. Cesarean births, which are becoming more and more common these days for various reasons, lack this vital process and can cause (in some cases) touch sensitivities later on. The closeness with the mother following the birth, the caressing and nursing next to the warmth of the skin-to-skin contact is a welcoming experience into the world. The warmth and shelter of being in the safe peaceful womb has come to an end. Karl König brings a unique perspective to the experience of birth by comparing it to the event described in Genesis when Adam and Eve are driven out of paradise. “The newborn baby is a deeply wounded being: it is shocked and shaken and can only adjust itself if a great deal of care is given to it. The child needs the comfort which only the mother, with her milk, her love and her nearness can provide” (König, p. 37). This “nearness” which König so beautifully describes is the tender touch of the mother, that lives in her hands and in her heart and creates a second womb that surrounds the child on earth. Infants in orphanages and institutional environments often have a condition called, “failure to thrive.” Even though they receive the necessary nutrition and body care, the lack of touch can cause a child to sicken or even die.

In *The Oxytocin Factor: Tapping the Hormone of Calm, Love and Healing* by Kerstin Unvas Moberg, the sense of touch is researched through physiological patterns and neurochemical reactions. Moberg describes how common the overload of

sense impressions in our modern Western culture has become for adults and children. The author then relates how the stress-related fight-or-flight system in most of us has been activated to a very high degree because of so much over-stimulation. Moberg then goes on to say “the same brain and nervous system that produces the fight-or-flight mechanism sometimes generate entirely opposite responses when oxytocin, a hormone, is involved.” The release of oxytocin is an antidote to the fight-or-flight response and it is one of the strongest sources of input that involve the responses of calming, relaxing, and connecting. The warming caress of the sun, a soothing warm bath, and pleasant, rhythmic touch are some of the activities that “trigger the brain’s release of oxytocin, which plays a key role in promoting the body’s calming response.” We respond naturally to a baby who is distressed through rhythmic rocking, cuddling and walking the baby. We gently and rhythmically rub the back of a child who is distressed as we hold and soothe them. We use touch instinctively in the ways described by Moberg so that the child will experience a calming effect and a sense of restored well-being can be promoted (Moberg, p. 4 and 22).



When we touch an object it gives us the inner sense of boundary, “where I end and the outer world begins.” Rudolf Steiner relates the sense of touch to what he calls “God Sensing.” “With every experience of touch there rays into the soul a feeling profoundly stirred by the creative power that underlies all material existence and accounts for the wide range of differentiation in the phenomenal universe” (quoted in Kohler, p. 47). When a healthy sense of touch is experienced freely by the child and becomes a strong foundation, later in life this experience will carry the possibility of turning inward. Steiner speaks of the relationship of the sense of touch transforming into the sense of experiencing the ego or “I” of the other person. We may say, “I was touched to the core of my being but what you just said,” or “What you did touched my heart.” We inwardly touch the very essence of another person and allow ourselves to be touched while holding a sensitive boundary of response. This extraordinary human social capacity to experience one another in this way is truly a creative bridge that helps us cross into meaningful and deep relationships.

References

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SPRING CLEANING CIRCLE

composed by Laurie Clark

Spring Song

D E D B D B B A B D

We skip and we sing, to welcome the spring

B A G A B B B A G A G

And we will help mother to clean everything.

Mother wants to clean the house, she needs help from me and you
So that the house can shine like the fresh new spring, it can sparkle too.
Our hands shall do good work this day
Let us name our fingers, I will show you the way.

Fingerplay (source unknown)

Little Penny

Penny Roo

Roo Whistle

Mary Josell

And Old Man Bumbabala!

Mother says we must sweep
Sweep and sweep and sweep the floor
From wall to wall, the dirt goes, right out the door.

“Crawl under the bed,” that is what mother has said.
To get the dust bunnies, get each one
Blow them in the air, it is so much fun!
We will put them into the basket
And now that job is done!

We slide and we sing to welcome the spring
And we will help mother to clean everything.

Mother asks us to fold the laundry
Fold the laundry, stack each piece, it is a pile high sitting
Will the pile reach all the way to the sky?

Now wash the dishes, wipe them, and put them away
Stack them on the shelf, “Be careful”, is what mother does say.

Our dog named Shaggy is dirty and does not smell too good
Shall we gently wash him? Mother says we should.
Baths are not what our dog likes and he is running away
“Come back here, Shaggy, we are spring cleaning today.”
We caught Shaggy, now we can wash and scrub
Scrubba, dub dub, gently wash the dog in the tub.

Sing a few times, skip around room

Sit down

Point me/you

Hold hands up, wiggle fingers

Hold up pinky finger

Hold up ring finger

Hold up middle finger

Hold up pointer finger

Hold up thumb

Sweeping gesture

Big sweep gesture

Put wool pieces in middle of the circle

Blow pieces of wool in air

Into a basket

Slide sideways in circle, singing

Alternate one hand on top of the
other moving from sitting to standing

Gesture of washing, wiping and stacking

Hold nose

Crawling

Repeat

One child is on all fours like a dog,
another child gently ‘washes’ the back
of the child who is on all fours – then
trade –washer becomes the dog

Shall we wash our kitty too?
No, no, says mother—this is what you can do.
Clean kitty's bowl, make it shiny and bright

Then pour milk into it, now that is right.

"Go to the barn," mother says, to your pony sweet.
"Take the pick, and clean the mud off the pony's feet."
One, two, three, now this one's clean.
Four, five, six, don't play tricks.
Seven, eight, nine, this one looks fine.
Ten, eleven, twelve, now all is well.

Back into the barn dear pony, here is some hay so sweet
Now please try to keep the mud from going in between your feet.

*We gallop and sing, to welcome the spring
And we will help mother to clean everything.*

Find fresh flowers, mother says, to decorate the table
Please bring as many flowers as you are able
Snowdrops and crocuses please do bring
For these are the very first flowers of spring
Here are beautiful spring flowers, I will sit down on the ground.
I pick the flowers for the table
But I feel raindrops and hear their lovely sound
Here come the spring showers
The raindrops are spring cleaning mother earth too and giving a drink
to the flowers.

Pitter patter pitter patter—here come the spring showers
Pitter patter pitter patter giving a drink to the flowers
Pitter patter pitter patter I am getting wet right here
Pitter patter pitter patter—I better go home, oh dear!

*We run and we sing, to welcome the spring
And we will help mother to make the house clean.*

The flowers are on the table
I have done as much as I am able
Mother thanks me for helping her,
She hugs me, I have done my very best
But now I am tired and I will lay down and rest.

**Left hand forms "bowl" while right
"washes" it
Open right hand "pours" with thumb
separated as spout**

**Scrape lifted foot with hand
Right foot in front
Left foot in front
Right foot in back
Left foot in back**

Gallop and sing

Open flower hand gesture

**Children sit in a circle facing the back
of the child in front of them- when the
raindrops fall they gently tap the back
of the child from the shoulders down**

Run in circle or in path around room

Children hug each other

**Sing lullaby or play lyre or
glockenspiel. Children can rub each
other's backs during rest.**