



The Primacy Of Human Touch

Positive, loving contact with others early in life leads to the development of good behaviors in adulthood.

By Ben E. Benjamin and Ruth Werner



A hundred years ago, about 99 percent of babies in orphanages in the United States died before they were seven months old. Orphanages were an everyday part of the social landscape. Unwanted babies were deposited in these institutions, where modern antiseptic procedures and adequate food seemed to guarantee them at least a fighting chance for a healthy life.

But the babies died, not from infectious diseases or malnutrition, but by wasting away from a condition called "marasmus." Sterile surroundings did not cure it; having enough food made no difference. These unwanted babies died from a completely different kind of deprivation: lack of touch.

When the babies were removed from these large, impersonal institutions and placed in environments where they received physical nurturing along with formula, the marasmus reversed. They gained weight and finally began to thrive.

Touch is vital for survival in the very young. Every day in our nation's hospitals, many sick and premature infants,

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isolated in sterile environments, are given massage for 15 minutes, three times a day. Sometimes, the babies are taken out and simply held and/or rocked by hospital volunteers. Although these babies are given exactly the same amount of food as others, they grow faster, gain more weight and leave the hospital sooner than their untouched counterparts.

In addition, the "volunteer grandparents" who give their time to massage, touch, hold and rock these babies often experience significant benefits as well; they drink less coffee, and make fewer trips to the doctor. When they regularly massage babies, they also have lower anxiety levels, fewer symptoms of depression and improved self-esteem.

Why is touch so powerful? What magical events transpire when skin contacts skin? And what is the connection between physical human contact and virtually every aspect of health and well-being?

Where Touch Begins

The sensation of touch begins in the womb. The skin, derived from the same cells as the nervous system, is a perfect instrument for collecting information about our surrounding environment long before birth. A fetus will withdraw from the touch of a probe at less than eight weeks of gestation, showing that the link between touch and survival is one of the first and most important protective mechanisms to develop.

Did you know that all human babies are born before they are developmentally and physiologically ready? Our heads are so big that we can't afford to gestate any longer than we do. Most

other mammals are able to move around, at least in a limited way, soon after they are born. Think of newborn horses or deer, which are up and walking shortly after birth. Humans, on the other hand, are much slower to reach this stage. In fact, the average time between birth and crawling equals the average time between conception and birth: nine months. What does this have to do with touch? Simply this: Newborn human infants are not fully developed. They cannot see clearly, or differentiate sounds. They communicate with the world almost entirely through their skin.

Consider newborn babies. One moment they are supremely comfortable, in a snug, climate-controlled,

perfectly shaped uterus. The next moment they are squeezed and pushed into our bright, noisy, cold, wall-less world. All babies, including perfectly healthy ones and others who suffer from colic, AIDS and abuse, benefit from regular touch. Stress, as measured by chemicals in the blood, is reduced. This results in babies crying less, sleeping more and being generally easier to soothe. What many studies show makes sense: The messages we receive through our skin, particularly relating to our safety and well-being, will have resonating effects on our behavior for the rest of our lives.


Even older babies who are not yet crawling use their skin as a way to gather information about the world.

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Children who are welcomed with lots of physical touch tend to grow into well-adjusted and loving adults. Children who are deprived of touch in infancy show tendencies toward aggressiveness and violent behavior.

Watch a baby explore a new toy. The first place it goes is into the baby's mouth. The baby is not really interested in how the rattle tastes. It happens that a large number of sensory neurons are located in the skin of the lips and tongue, and this is where a baby obtains his or her information. A baby puts a new toy into his or her mouth to find out what it feels like!

Infants And Touch

Many experiments with other mammals have been conducted to explore the connection between the touch they receive in infancy and their adult behavior. The results clearly show that the way an infant is touched, even in the first few hours of life, influences whether it survives, and how it copes in the world as an adult. One example is the way mammals, namely infant rodents, are licked by their mothers. This contact stimulates the first bowel excretions that are necessary for survival. Without this stimulation, the babies die. Recent research also shows how baby rats, after being taken away from their mothers, suffer measurable brain damage—cells in the central nervous system actually degenerate and fall apart without their mothers' touch. Furthermore, baby rats that are removed from their mothers will not mother their own offspring. Early nurturing through touch is vital to the survival of the species.

Consistent nurturing touch in infancy also has been shown to influence later coping skills. When nurtured young monkeys have been previously placed in stressful situations, they approach new situations with curiosity and tentative courage. When introduced to a new enclosure, for

instance, they will explore it by degrees, frequently retreating to hug mom's leg for reassurance. Then they will venture forth again and again until they feel comfortable in their new surroundings.

Baby monkeys who are raised without comforting, nurturing touch do not have that source of security and assurance. They are easily overwhelmed by new experiences. Placed in an unfamiliar environment without a sense of safety, they simply collapse in hysterical screams. They cannot cope with challenging or threatening situations the same way that their touched and comforted cohorts can.

Although we feasibly cannot conduct studies on touch deprivation with human babies, we can look at the differences in cultural attitudes toward infants, and how those attitudes are reflected in patterns of adult behavior.

The Netsilik Eskimos. Inhabiting the Boothia Peninsula in the Canadian Northwest Territories, the Netsilik Eskimos carry their babies—skin to skin—on their backs. Then mother and child are covered with layers of furs. The mother fully expects to be centered on her child at all times, and the baby hardly touches the ground before he or she is ready to walk. The attitude of this tribe toward its children is one of joy and welcome. This gives the Netsilik child a sense of security that lasts a lifetime. The Netsilik Eskimo is constantly threatened with the uncertainties of his ecosystem, yet stressful situations rarely upset his emotional homeostasis.

The Mundugumors. In New Guinea, the Mundugumors, on the other hand, tend to be a more aggressive people and consequently have dif-

ferent child rearing techniques. These people have less skin contact with their babies, who are often carried in ridged baskets and are weaned as soon as possible. The Mundugumor children live a childhood that is considered an inconvenience and perhaps even a threat to the tribe's well-being.

Many other cultural statistics show the same pattern: Children who are welcomed with lots of physical touch and tactile stimulation tend to grow into well-adjusted, capable and loving adults. Children who are deprived of touch in infancy show tendencies toward aggressiveness and violent behavior.

Naturally, there are countless other variables that influence human behavior besides how we are touched as babies. But it does make sense that during this most vulnerable time of our lives, we would form patterns and expectations about how the world works, specifically about how safe and valued we are in the world, through our skin.

Study after study demonstrates that for all mammals, receiving touch that is pleasurable, safe and appropriate reduces sickness, depression and aggressive behaviors. In fact, as we learn more about this everyday, miraculous phenomenon, we may find that therapeutic touch and massage hold more answers than we ever imagined.

Dr. James Prescott, a developmental neurophysiologist at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, says: "I am convinced that deprivation of sensory pleasure is the principal root cause of violence, and, further, that there exists a reciprocal relationship: the presence of one inhibits the existence of another . . ."

"I believe that the deprivation of body touch, contact and movement are

the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances, which include depressive and autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence and aggression."

Afterthoughts

What we can do is attempt to include more nurturing touch in the lives of our infants, children, teenagers, elders and ourselves. As we grow and develop, our need for touch does not disappear. We continue to benefit from the touch we receive from those who love and care for us. A wide range of body therapies offers another avenue for receiving the benefits of human touch: They can dissipate accumulated stress and activate relaxation within the body. Touch therapies offer a way to integrate the benefits of human touch in our lives. ☑

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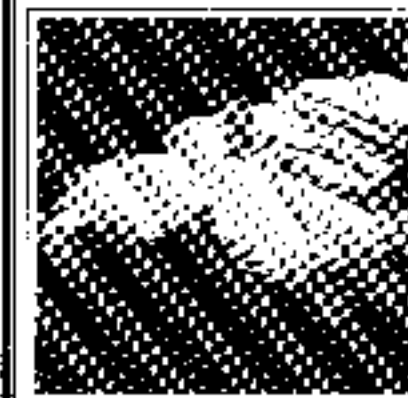
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