Southern
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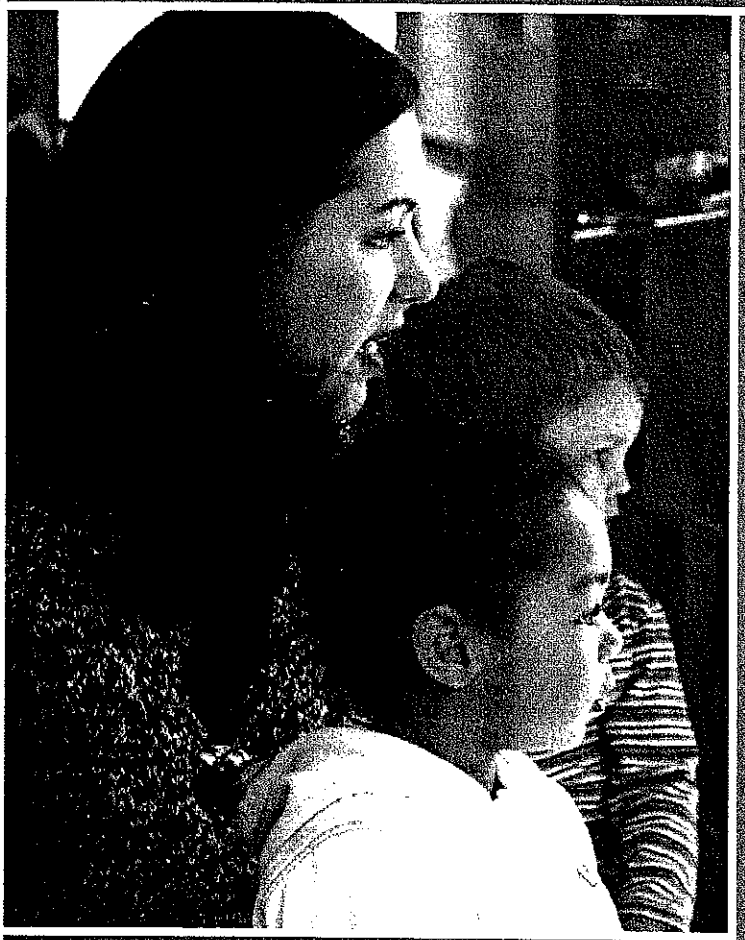
Dimensions of Early Childhood



Volume 34, Number 3 Fall 2006

Theme Issue on
From Biters to Bullies to Bullets: Guiding Positive Prosocial Behavior

- **Biting Touchpoints**
- **Touch Reduces Aggression**
- **Bullying Quiz**
- **How Bullying Begins**
- **Children's Books on Friendships**
- **Emotionally Safe Environments**

Southern Early Childhood Association

Editor - Janet Brown McCracken
Cover photo by Subjects & Predicates

Dimensions of Early Childhood

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Why are children in the United States increasingly seen as aggressive? How can concerned families and teachers reduce aggression through positive touch?

Reducing Aggression With Touch

Frances M. Carlson and Bryan G. Nelson

Much attention has been focused recently on the problem of rising levels of aggression among children. At the most severe end of the aggression spectrum have been multiple incidences of school shootings and student-to-student beatings in which many children have died. So terrified are parents, educators, and administrators that extreme measures have been implemented—measures that range from metal detectors in high schools to expulsions of 2-year-olds for biting in early education settings—in an effort to control the escalating violence and aggression.

Without positive and responsive touch, secure attachment is unlikely to occur.

Unfortunately, measures that focus only on the control of aggression will not be successful. Instead, the focus should be on asking and answering questions about what may be driving children to increase their aggression levels. In other words, what perceived value does aggression hold in children's lives? Could children be developing more aggressive behaviors simply in order to survive?

Attachment and Aggression

Looking at children and their rising levels of aggression through an ethological lens can shed light on why many children are more aggressive than they have been in the past. Ethology is the belief that certain behaviors sustain and grow due to their life-preserving value. Scientists who subscribe to this school of thought—ethologists—are concerned with the "adaptive significance of behavior, how it functions to promote an individual's survival and fitness" (Smith, 1995, p. 4). One primary area of study is the behavior of attachment.

Importance of Secure Attachment

Attachment can be defined as the adult-child bond that allows children to venture out securely into the world to explore and grow. It is the process of being completely trusting and dependent in order to become independent. Ethologists consider attachment to be one of the chief behaviors with life-preserving value. Without the bond of secure attachment, infants cannot grow successfully away from the primary caregiver in order to begin and continue a life apart from that person.

Attachment as a behavior needed for life success has held universal acceptance for the past 30 years (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Waters & Cummings, 2000).

Could aggression also be a behavior that is evolving and sustaining for its life-preserving value? In order to answer this question, one must first understand

- how attachment forms
- the role touch plays in the formation of secure attachment
- how physically aggressive touch may compensate when positive physical touch is unavailable

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Nancy P. Alexander

Children with secure attachments usually exhibit more prosocial behaviors such as cooperating, communicating positively, sharing, empathy, and the ability to make and sustain friendships.

With nurturing touch, children are more readily able to form a secure attachment bond with caregivers. Without this positive touch, secure attachment can fail to form, leaving children angry, violent, and aggressive.

Secure attachment develops from child-caregiver interactions, including these:

- promptly and responsively meeting a young child's needs
- adequately and accurately providing the right amount of interaction and stimulation
- basing attention, stimulation, and interactions on the individual child's responses and needs

This prompt, responsive, and adaptive behavior from caregivers includes the offering of touch. Handling, holding, cuddling, massaging, and stroking are all positive and nurturing physical interactions needed for secure attachment to develop and be sustained (Honig, 1998). Without positive and responsive touch, secure attachment is unlikely to occur.

When secure attachment has failed to develop, children then face life with one of several types of insecure attachments, including the most severe type: non-attachment.

- *Insecure attachment* typically occurs when a primary caregiver has failed to meet a child's needs promptly and responsively, or when meeting the caregiver's needs has taken precedence over meeting the child's needs (Watson, 2003).
- *Non-attachment* may form when a child has lacked positive and nurturing interactions from any caregivers. Such is often the case with children growing in institutionalized care where nurturing caregiving may be inconsistent or nonexistent. This state of non-attachment may be characterized by a lack of response to adults and wild aggression from children when frustrated.

Holden (1996) states that, for children growing up in care settings that lack physically nurturing interactions, this lack of cuddling and care often resulted in failed attachment.

Links Between Insecure Attachment and Aggression

Children with secure attachments usually exhibit more prosocial behaviors such as cooperating, communicating positively, sharing, empathy, and the ability to make and sustain friendships.

In contrast, children with insecure attachments exhibit

- increased aggression and rage
- decreased self-control
- low self-esteem
- lack of empathy or remorse
- an inability to develop and maintain friendships
- behavioral and academic problems at school (Levy & Orlans, 1998)

Because positive and nurturing touch is such a critical element in the formation of secure attachment, it is reasonable to conclude that, in its absence, an increase in insecure attachments would result. And with this increase in insecure attachments, an increase in aggression predictably follows. Turner (1991) found that boys with insecure attachments are four times more likely than securely attached boys to commit aggressive acts.

Is there a decrease or absence of positive and nurturing touch in the United States, in both children's homes and their educational settings? Bailey (2000) believes there is. She writes, "We have become a society of untouchables...young infants are placed in infant seats to be carried...and in bassinets to sleep. We are becoming trained to touch babies only when they demand our attention" (p. 11).

This touch taboo in Western culture is not new. Parenting experts who advised previous generations, such as Watson, Spock, and Ferber, all admonished parents to leave their babies in their beds to cry it out without any physical contact or comfort. A benchmark study by Civitas, Brio, and Zero to Three (2000) found that 44% of U.S. parents believe that holding a crying baby will spoil the child.

Many still feel touching is a luxury, not a need. The reality, though, is that the need for touch has long been recognized as valid a need as the need for food or water (Chapin,

1915; Spitz, 1946 in Montagu, 1986; Harlow, 1958).

Touch and Survival

The other reality is that children in the United States are, for the most part, touched less than their counterparts around the world. Field conducted research to see if children were more aggressive in countries where they were touched less. She found that, "the high-touch cultures have relatively low rates of violence while the low-touch cultures have extremely high rates of youth and adult violence" (1999, p. 12).

In 2002, the World Health Organization (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano) reported similar findings. According to their report, the youth homicide rate in the United States is more than 10 times greater than that in other industrialized nations where more positive touch occurs.

For example, in Japan and Korea, infants are held in close skin-to-skin proximity for the majority of their first year (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000). The youth homicide rate in Japan was 0.4 per 100,000. In the United States, however, where infants only spend up to 25% of their first year in close physical proximity to anyone, the youth homicide rate was 11 per 100,000.

Although positive touch seems to be absent in many young children's lives, negative or punitive touch is, unfortunately, readily available. Researchers who measured both positive and negative physical interactions among families and children found that when positive touch was measured, both Greek families and those from the former Soviet Union touched their children more often than families from the United States. When negative, punitive, and restraining touches were measured, though, U.S. children were touched more often (Thayer, 1988).

This preponderance of negative or punitive touch transcends children's homes. Children are also experiencing negative touch in many educational settings. According to a survey of public school systems in the U.S., 22 states allowed corporal punishment of students (Danger Zones, 1998).

The need for touch is as valid a need as the need for food or water.

Also, because many fear that touch may be misconstrued as child abuse, entire school systems have also adopted no-touch policies that forbid any positive physical contact with a child or student. With no-touch policies, physical contact between child and adult can only occur for diapering and cleansing younger children and for restraining older children for disciplinary reasons. Physical contact may also be allowed in order to administer first aid. Any other positive or nurturing physical contact is usually taboo.

This focus on perpetuating negative and physically aggressive touch, while forbidding positive and nurturing touch, holds great concern for both parents and teachers, and with just cause. Del Prete (1997), a school guidance counselor, has noticed this shift away from positive touch with children towards increased aggression in students. He notes:

> For the past 20 years the trend toward abstaining from touch in schools has been growing in sensitivity toward the problems of sexual harassment, molestation, and abuse.... Touching children in schools has become virtually taboo.... Meanwhile, the overwhelming prevalence of violent and aggressive physical contact...might by comparison seem more acceptable. (p. 59)

Honig (2005) noticed an increase in aggression when a decrease in physical contact has occurred. She states that:

> Many caregivers do not provide the...intimate pats, back rubs, caresses, and leisurely holding on laps and in arms that little ones need! So our solution for decreasing aggressive actions in group care is more training for staff, more loving touches, more holding in arms, more intimate one-on-one interactions.... (p. 2)

If positive touch is necessary for secure attachment to form and maintain throughout a person's life, and positive touch is increasingly missing from many children's lives, yet negative and punitive touches are readily available, what may children be learning about the role of touch and how to gain touch?

Unfortunately, they may have learned that the only way to be touched is through the use of aggression. When children are aggressive, other children will often return the aggressive touch. It may hurt, but it fulfills the role of skin-to-skin contact. When children are aggressive, teachers will touch them to restrain them, and sometimes to physically punish them, although they will not touch them at any other time.

Again, this type of touch is neither positive nor nurturing, yet in the absence of any positive touch, it will do. One educator commented that "Violence among children in

schools (pushing, shoving, tripping, arm pinching) may be an indirect way of being touched" (Lawson, 1998, p. 45).

The Roles of Fathers and Men Teachers

Considering how infrequently boys, compared to girls, are touched in Western cultures (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999) it is not surprising that boys perpetuate most of the violence in schools: the pushing, shoving, tripping, arm pinching.

Boys are more likely to be expelled from schools than girls, and—in preschool—boys are 4 1/2 times more likely than girls to be expelled (Gilliam, 2005). Boys are also referred more often to special education than girls (Halpern, 1997; Kleinfeld, 1998). In teachers' daily discussions, many seek sympathy for those who work in classrooms with a greater percentage of boys than girls.

It is abundantly clear that touch can help to reduce aggression; but what is known about the role males play in providing nurturing touch to girls and boys and the connection between nurturing males in the lives of children and positive child outcomes? Perhaps there is a connection between the low percentages of nurturing men who use positive touch in children's daily lives and boys' levels of aggressive behavior. Consider these facts:

- Most children in the United States will spend part of their childhood in single-parent households (McLanahan & Sandefur, 2004).
- In schools, where boys and girls spend a large part of their lives, the percentage of men teachers is at a 40-year low (National Education Association, 2003).

The result is that children have fewer opportunities to see men in positive roles. Instead, they are often dependent on media-portrayed images of men—images that may portray men as only physically aggressive (Nelson, 2002).

Fathers Do Help

Research has shown us that the necessity of attachment of fathers to their infants is similar to infants' attachment to mothers (Lamb, Thompson, Gardner, & Charnov, 1985). Numerous studies show the importance of fathers' positive involvement in children's lives and the important role positive touch plays.

Children are more likely to graduate from high school, girls are less likely to become pregnant, and both boys and girls are more likely to attend college when a father is involved in their lives (Baron & Sylvester, 2002; Lamb et al., 1985; McLanahan & Sandefur, 2004). A father's physical affection positively affects both girls' and boys' self-esteem (Barber & Thomas, 1986).

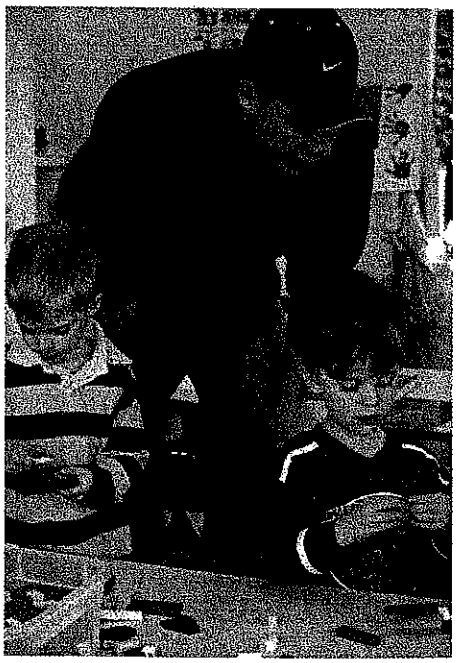
What About Male Teachers?

Although there is no conclusive research that supports or refutes the impact of having more male teachers, research has shown that parents, principals, and teachers believe it is important to have men working in the classroom.

In a survey of the members of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 97.9% of members agreed that it is important that men work with children in early childhood education (Nelson, 2002). In this study, administrators and teachers wrote about the positive impacts of men teachers. A director of an early childhood program with a bachelor's degree and 15 years of experience wrote,

> This country as a whole does not value, support, or encourage men to work with young children. In spite of some progress in the home, the general population, especially males themselves, do[es] not recognize the value of the contributions [men] can make and the profound influence they can have in the early childhood population." (p. 18)

Boys are not touched as much as girls (Field, et al., 1994; Harrison-Speake & Willis, 1995). In Western society, boys demonstrate the greatest amount of aggression and violence. Since positive touch decreases aggression, the obvious conclusion would be to ensure that boys receive



Subjects & Predicates

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positive touch in their daily lives. One could even hypothesize that the decreased touch for boys—especially from male teachers—could be attributed to increased focus on policies forbidding such touch, or from the stigma attached to men teachers working with and touching young children.

One area of discussion in the United States is the concern that men teachers will harm children, hence the prevalence of no-touch policies in many early childhood programs. Both men and women may be suspect of a man who wants to work with children—particularly younger children. So still ingrained in society is the status quo role of the male that people are suspicious, and often question why a grown man would want to work with children.

Touch can help to reduce aggression.

Many parents, teachers, and administrators fear that male educators will take advantage of vulnerable children. However, this myth has no roots in child abuse and neglect statistics (Nelson, 2004). In 90% of reported cases of child abuse and neglect, perpetrators were parents or other relatives, not teachers (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). And in those 90% of reported cases, women comprised the higher percentage of perpetrators: 58% (NCCANI, 2003).

Of course children must be safe from harm while in school, and schools must be vigilant in their hiring practices. But suspecting that men pose a threat simply because of their gender, or instituting "no-touch policies" for only men teachers, does not protect children. Actions rather than suspicions are what protect children—actions such as carefully screening applicants and supporting teachers with personnel policies, supervision, and training.

One of several key reasons men do not enter nor remain in teaching is fear of false abuse accusations by children in their classrooms (Nelson, 2002). Supervisors can take these steps to prevent false allegations:

- Have an open door policy that encourages parents to visit classrooms at any time.
- Provide good supervision by regularly observing all teachers.
- Ensure positive touch in a classroom by offering workshops about policies on appropriate touch.

By inviting fathers to be involved in classrooms and by recruiting men to be teachers, boys and girls can see men model positive touch.

Reduce Aggression With Touch

Families and early childhood programs can take several steps to return positive physical contact to young children's lives. First of all, families and programs need a common understanding of what constitutes positive touch. For touch to be a positive experience for a child, it must first be nurturing, meaning it is offered to only increase the health and well-being of the child and the relationship between the child and the caregiver.

Any touch given a child should also be welcomed by the child. Children have a right to their own bodies and the privilege to accept or reject touch as each sees fit. Touch given to a child should demonstrate respect for that child's individual, cultural, and developmental preferences. When offering or returning touch to a child, make sure the touch is wanted and welcomed.

Introduce and maintain positive touch for children.

There are several ways to touch children throughout the day, both in their homes and in their out-of-home care and educational settings.

- ☐ Wake children with back and shoulder massages.
- ☐ Greet children with a pat on the shoulder or a reciprocated hug that says, "I'm glad to see you today."
- ☐ Make physical contact throughout the day with rituals and routines that offer opportunities for children to interact physically with each other, such as art, block building, group times, music and movement, games, story time, and rest time (Carlson, 2005).
- ☐ End the day with each child by saying good-bye or good-night with touch, either with a hug, a handshake, or a high-five.

The introduction of positive touch can have a dramatic and immediate effect on the level of aggression in a classroom. A prekindergarten teacher commented recently that, "Touching children does work. All I did was start placing my hand gently on each child's back throughout the day. Within a week, all the fighting stopped" (Personal communication, October 31, 2005).

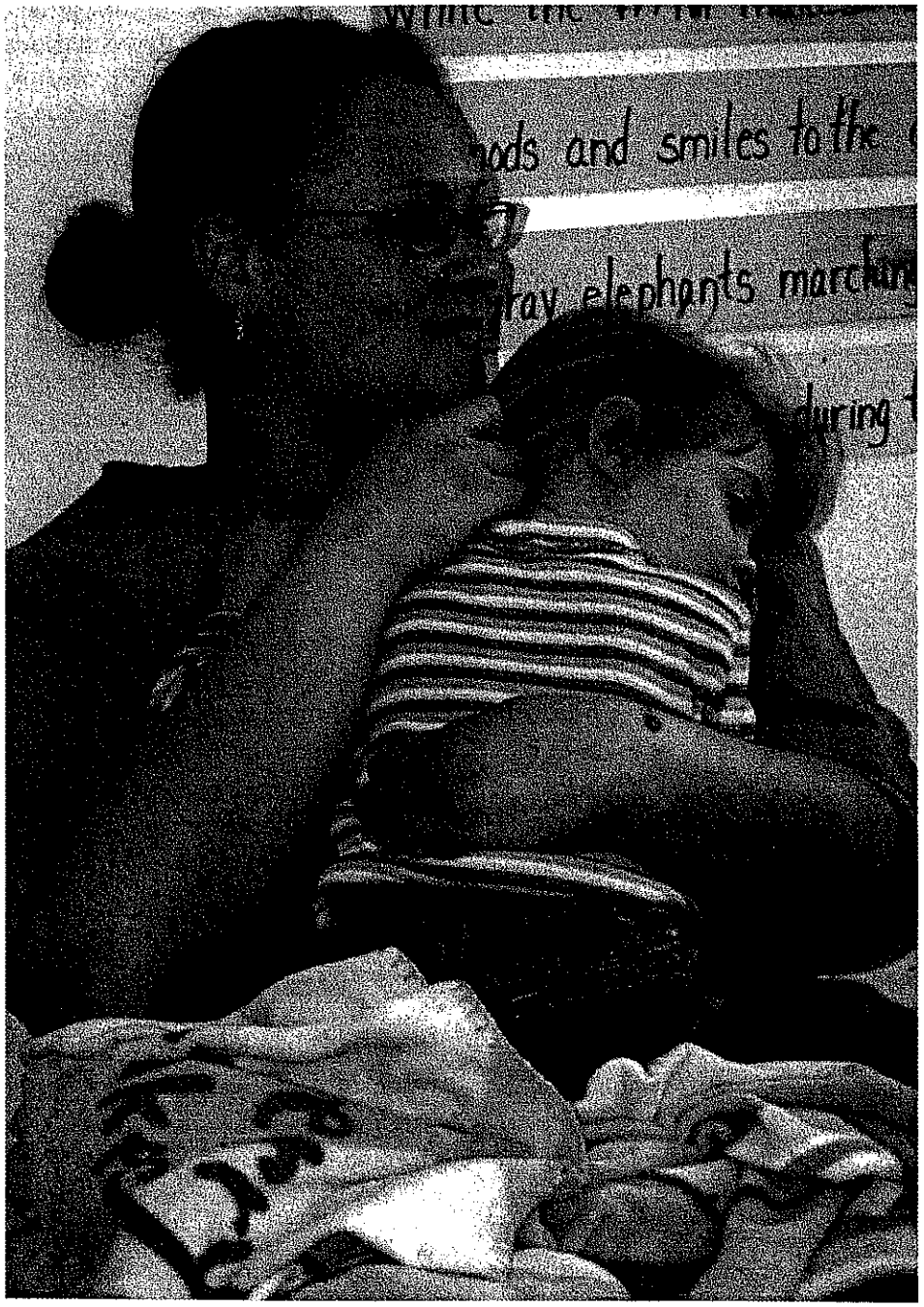
Each piece of this complicated aggression puzzle viewed separately may lead families and educators to believe extreme measures—such as suspensions for toddlers and pre-

schoolers, and no-touch policies for teachers—are the only viable answers.

When viewed together, though, a different and far more positive solution emerges from what is known about child development. Positive touch leads to and helps sustain secure attachment. Secure attachment is necessary for survival. If touch is a leading factor in a life-preserving behavior, touch itself then is indeed a life-preserving factor.

Young children in U.S. culture often lack access to positive touch. Instead, the touch most readily available to them is punitive and sometimes harmful. Without a way to gain positive, nurturing, life-sustaining touch, children may have learned that aggressive acts and the touch resulting from those acts are the only ways through which touch is available to them. Unfortunately, in many instances, they are right.

To break this cycle, homes, programs, and schools should introduce and maintain positive touch for children in ways that support children's social and emotional development. Ensure that both families and educators—men and women—are involved in building healthy attachment relationships with children. As positive touch increases, aggression will decrease.



Subjects & Predicates

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