

The Healing Power of Touch, Part II

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Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work.

—Blessed Teresa of Calcutta

Through the Protecting God's Children (PGC) trainings, we have learned sexual predators use grooming behaviors to get children more and more used to the predator's touch. We know physical grooming is a major part of predators' repertoire. In Part II of this series of articles we will take a closer look at appropriate versus inappropriate touch. In our efforts to protect children, is it possible we may go to the opposite extreme? Is there any negative effect if someone grows up with little or no physical contact?

In Part I of this article we examined how healthy touch is important for a child to develop positive and appropriate relationships into adulthood. As stated previously, not all touch is self-affirming or part of the grooming process. As we know, predators use grooming techniques to make the potential victim feel comfortable with the molester. Touch progresses from so-called innocent to more and more intimate and boundary violating. In this section we will look at the differences between healthy and inappropriate touch.

As PGC facilitators, we are both often asked by program participants if any physical touch of children within our ministries is allowed. We especially hear this from teachers of young children and coaches. While it is important for participants to know the location's Code of Conduct and ministry guidelines, the answer we give follows the VIRTUS guidelines: any touch must be **P**ublic, **A**ppropriate, and **N**onsexual (PAN is the acronym).

This healthy, appropriate touch may include:

- a brief pat on the shoulder
- shoulder hugs
- high fives
- helping a very young child tie their shoe laces
- bandaging a child's cut or bruise
- holding a young child's hand on the way to the classroom or when crossing the street

Inappropriate touching of children within a ministerial relationship includes:

- lingering caresses
- kissing on the lips
- rubbing one's body against the child's
- excessive tickling or wrestling, especially when hands or feet touch private areas
- any touching of genitals
- any touch that is meant for sexual gratification

Physical grooming is a gradual process. Predators may start out exhibiting what appears to be healthy or innocent touching. For example, a pat on the shoulder or a quick hug to make the child feel more comfortable with them so that touch can progress to intimate caresses and eventually actual molestation.

The need to protect children from predators has raised the level of concern for all of us. To respond by withdrawing appropriate, non-sexual touch does not help children, but instead hinders their growth. Priests, religious, deacons, teachers, coaches, parents and all care-giving adults need to be firm in their conviction in what they know and how they operate in ministry and with their families. We turn, as we should to Jesus, who Himself is the model for all appropriate and loving touch. Withholding appropriate touch is not the message of the Gospels.

As protectors of children, our job is not to withdraw all emotional and physical support and affection from children, but rather to teach adults and children safe and healthy boundaries. Our intent is to protect youth and nourish them at the same time.

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