

the
kids
are
all
right.

**SIMPLE MESSAGE IN THE CLASSROOM ALLOWS CHILDREN TO
GET IN TOUCH WITH EACH OTHER—AND THEMSELVES**
BY CLARE LA PLANTE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSANNA STINNETT



in 2003,

Connecticut Center for Massage Therapy (CCMT) instructor Linda Derick was grilling dinner on a warm December night in Andover, Connecticut with a colleague who was in town to guest lecture. Afterwards, talk turned to their craft. Her colleague turned to her and said, “There’s something I want you to see.”

He popped in a 10-minute tape from Axelsons Gymnastika Institute in Stockholm, Sweden of children practicing Peaceful Touch, the Axelson-developed system that incorporates healthy touch in classrooms in the form of basic Swedish massage, letter, number and story games, and other simple touches.

Axelsons’ director, Hans Axelson, had developed Peaceful Touch some 10 years earlier based on research that showed that nurturing touch for children elicits a similar response as breast-feeding does in babies, releasing oxytocin, the feel-good “cuddle hormone,” which promotes empathy, calmness and concentration. Today, more than 300,000 students in Europe have been recipients of Peaceful Touch, and it’s rare to find a preschool in Sweden that doesn’t implement it.



But back in 2003 it was new to Derick, and as the images of young children rubbing each other’s backs came on her television screen, she started to cry. “I thought: ‘This is very important,’” she says.

As a massage educator, Derick knows the complexities of professional touch—the techniques, experience and wisdom required before a massage therapist can work on a client. And yet, here she was, watching these children skillfully—and effectively—touch each other.

“What they were doing wasn’t scientific, and wasn’t skilled and wasn’t riddled with issues,” she says. It looked, she says, as natural as wiping a friend’s tears away, or putting a hand on a shoulder. “I think my tears were about how far away our culture is, and how profoundly easy and simple touch can be.”

MAKING IT WORK IN A PHOBIC SOCIETY

Although massage therapy has long been proven to be beneficial to children (visit www6.miami.edu/touch-research/research.htm for more information), modalities such as Peaceful Touch—where teachers facilitate children touching other children with simple, nurturing strokes—is a revolution of sorts.

It’s cropping up around the world under different names and slightly different methods, pioneered by massage therapists who are teaching educators, parents and early child care providers how to get back in touch with our children.

The results are clear: Healthy touch, which is what we’ll call it here, helps foster attachment; decrease aggression, depression and anxiety; and helps children identify healthy touch so they are less vulnerable to abuse, and less likely to be prematurely sexually active.

That it’s happening in the middle of our current low-



touch culture is a minor miracle. “What I think we don’t understand in this culture is that withholding touch from children from fear is as physically and emotionally harmful to children as harmful touch is,” says Frances M. Carlson, author of *Essential Touch: Meeting the Needs of Young Children*.

Nicole Mann, a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania-based massage therapist who is an abuse survivor, agrees. She remembers being asked to talk about her personal experiences with touch while in massage school. When Mann finally shared her story with others, she was astonished to hear that several other female students were also abuse survivors.

“I started thinking, ‘Why are those who have been abused as children not talking about it? How do we reach kids in the general population who are being abused and not saying anything—or perhaps don’t even know what is happening to them?’” she says.

Mann set out to find a way. Certainly, learning about “stranger danger,” as she and so many other children did, wasn’t the way. She, like the majority of those abused,

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knew her abuser. Instead, she looked to her own profession. She consulted with an Axelson-trained therapist to help develop a program of nurturing touch that could be taught to children. She also referred to the Pennsylvania Rape Coalition's literature for safe touching practices—which recommends avoiding touching children on the lower back and thighs.

She emphasized boundaries. "Touch is about choice," she says. "You don't have to give or receive massage unless you want to, and if you start, you have the right to change your mind."

Much of Mann's hands-on work now includes leading workshops at libraries, schools, grief camps and conferences for early childhood care providers and educators—where she can teach children and those who care for them the benefits of healthy touch and the power of saying "no."

She tells stories—Noah's Ark with its menagerie, for example—or sings songs—such as the "Itsy Bitsy Spider"—on the child's back. Other times, she'll do tactile guessing games with the child's hands. The children love it.

Mann mostly hears encouragement from teachers as well. "I hear over and over again, 'I want to touch the children, but I can't because of liability.'" She hopes that her program will help to change that.

"Just as nurses come into classrooms to screen for hearing and vision, and others screen for learning disabilities, I want to be able to go in and alleviate fears and say, 'I can show you how to do this so children can get affirmation that they need,'" she says.

Derick shares this wish. About six months after that fateful night in 2003 when she viewed the Peaceful Touch video, she received a flyer—serendipitously, she says—advertising a Hans Axelson workshop near her home in Connecticut.

PEACEFUL TOUCH U.S.

After attending, and connecting with other local, like-minded souls, a new entity was born. "We started Peaceful Touch U.S. that weekend," Derick says. Today, she co-chairs the program with Thomas VanDemark.

First, they had to translate the program for American culture, which meant no Swedish massage (too hands-on for the American market) and no hand-to-skin contact—way too uncomfortable for touch-free Americans.

Peaceful Touch U.S. created its own training manual, which included its four principals: permission (always ask first), presence (be present to your friend), pressure (ask for feedback) and practice (makes perfect).

Derick then approached a state-funded early child education center in nearby Newington, Connecticut, which served 60 children, aged three months through kindergarten, with a staff of 20. It helped that one of the parents was also a student at the CCMT. In the summer of 2006, Derick trained the staff in four, three-hour sessions over the course of a month.

The center's director, Patrick Clow, says the Peaceful Touch training was like visiting Mars. "In my [traditional American] education, we never had any kind of coursework discussing touch, the quality of touch and the importance of touch," he says.

He saw immediate results, though, especially with one 4-year-old tantrum-prone boy, which reinforced Clow's decision, even though it was initially a hard sell to his board. "If someone came [near] the boy he would yell and scream and get upset," Clow says. "The other children would get belligerent or defensive."

Today, it's a different story. "Now they say to him, 'Gee, you look like you could use some Peaceful Touch,'" says Clow. Even when the boy says no to Peaceful Touch, he quickly calms down. Most of his tantrums also immediately stop.

The center now implements Peaceful Touch as part of its normal day. Some of the children even bring it home, and offer it to their parents, which Clow admits he finds amazing.

The staff also benefited. Not only are they dealing with calmer students, but they bonded with each other during the training, too. "All this time, we were focusing on the kids," says Derick, "but what I saw in training was the impact on the teachers—it was beautiful. When we start touching each other, it brings up trust, intimacy, vulnerability and kindness."

THE RESEARCH AGREES

According to Tiffany Field, PhD, director of the Touch Research Institute of the University of Miami School of Medicine, who traveled to Stockholm to see Peaceful Touch first-hand, this kind of touch is a win-win situation. First, Field says that research shows that it helps



THE INTRODUCTION OF PEACEFUL TOUCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CAN BENEFIT BOTH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS BY INCREASING CALM AND WELL-BEING IN THE CLASSROOM.

to give a massage as well as receive one—so all children involved benefit. Also, it helps the kids to connect with each other. “It’s very hard to be physically aggressive toward someone who you have physically touched in a positive way,” she says.

That was part of the idea behind the West Palm Beach-based Upledger Institute’s Compassionate Touch Helping Hands Program, which began in 1997 when a group of teens appealed to Upledger founder John Upledger for help after witnessing the murder of their friend.

Upledger wanted to connect them to each other, basing this idea on a simple philosophy: When we touch

with compassion, we have no room for violence. He taught them how to help each other by using their “helping hands” to cradle hurt spots.

After success with the teens, the Upledger Foundation launched a pilot program in New Glarus, Wisconsin, for kindergarteners and first-graders. A clinical psychologist and certified Upledger Institute-trained CranioSacral® therapist taught the teachers (who filled out assessments pre- and post-program) to teach the kids to sandwich minor “owies” between their hands and think happy thoughts—whether about a pet, a favorite relative or snack. Any injury with blood was quickly referred to the teacher.

If the pain was emotional, the children were taught to place hands on either side of the heart. The process always started with a simple request: May I use my helping hands to help you?

The teachers worked with the students each day for 10 minutes for four months, and this included everything from songs to art projects to discussions. At the end of the pilot, the Upledger Institute gathered and analyzed the assessment data. The results were unmistakable:

“We were able to increase pro-social behaviors, includ-

ing self-control, assertion, cooperation, and decrease aggressive and hostile behavior,” says Barb Richmond, vice president of communications for the Upledger Institute.

A nationwide research project involving 560 students in schools in Michigan, California, Massachusetts and Florida confirmed the original findings of significant increases in pro-social behaviors, and significant decreases in hostile and aggressive behavior.

“I heard from a school nurse who said that children who paid daily visits to her office didn’t show up anymore,” says Richmond. They were now able to feel better with the help of their classmates.

However, the last research program was over in 2004. “Since then I have not had one successful program get off the ground, even though there’s been tremendous interest—I get e-mails and phone calls every week,” says Richmond. “They say, ‘We’re not allowed to touch.’”

She hopes that massage therapists, craniosacral practitioners and other body workers will continue to work to change the nation’s no-touch paradigm.

That’s what Santa Fe, New Mexico-based therapist Michele Herling is doing, one touch at a time. She launched her own program, called the Compassionate Touch Network, after working with Bosnian refugees in camps, performing craniosacral and other techniques on those suffering from stress disorders.

Although on a much lower scale, she sees stress affecting children here. “Children are growing up in very frenetic, stress-producing atmosphere, especially in our culture,” Herling says. “The touch piece really helps them to calm down, find their center and learn how to connect with others.”

She began with an elementary class taught by her sister, a teacher in Santa Fe, using simple massage strokes, and making it fun, such as naming the strokes after different animals: the baby giraffe when working the neck, the cat paw along the spinal column and the horses’ tail lightly trailing down the back.

Herling’s guidelines also start with permission. She tells the children to give feedback if it isn’t feeling good. “If the massager is not listening to you for any reasons and it doesn’t feel good stand up, turn around and look at your partner and say ‘I withdraw my permission.’”

Mostly, she’s seeing joyful participation—and positive results. She has a collage of a fifth-grade class that includes several class pictures. One girl usually stood apart. “Her body language was collapsed, and she was not looking at the camera or at the other children, and she was not touching the other children,” she says.

However, in two photos taken after compassionate touch, the girl stands with a huge smile on her face. “That smile spoke more clearly and beautifully than anything I could ever say about what touch can do for children,” says Herling.

Herling took the Peaceful Touch training when it came to Santa Fe last spring, and found herself surrounded by others who were pursuing a similar path. “I was so excited that there were other colleagues in this field interested in this,” she says. And she’s happy to be part of the vanguard. “People say to me, ‘You’re trying to work yourself out of a job—well, maybe I will, and I’m happy to do that,’ she says. “But there will always be a place for the professional, therapeutic level of touch.”

LOOKING AHEAD

Massage therapists play an essential role, agrees Carlson. “They have sensitivity, subtlety and professionalism to share touch in a healthy way,” she says. Her dream of the future is for communities that will have healthy touch trainers, including massage therapists, who will work with educators to teach them how to bring us all back in touch.

Frankly, she says, the stakes are too high not to. “If we don’t offer it, [children] will find a way to get it, because touch is necessary for life,” says Carlson. “It’s not a want. It’s a need—a valid, biological need.” ■

If you’re interested in starting such a program, visit the Peaceful Touch website at www.peacefultouch.net. Here, you’ll find more resources as well as a list of upcoming training dates. The training is 12-hours and is for elementary and pre-school teachers, health professionals including massage therapists, and parents or professionals who are interested in the program.