

One unfortunate consequence of our society talking much more openly about the horror of childhood sexual abuse is that too many men have become frightened to touch their kids. We need to keep working towards preventing children being sexually abused, we also need to work on helping men to rebuild or develop for the first time the confidence to express love to children in totally appropriate physical ways. This natural resource is far too precious to waste.

Whenever someone makes statements to me like “I’m too afraid to bath my daughter any more” my first response is usually “how sad for your wee girl”. Therapists generally work to empathise with their clients and my second response will be of the... “tell me about your fear” or “what is that like for you”... kind, however I see loving touch as such a crucial nutrient for a child to develop healthily that my first thought is for the child.

When we are born we have no sense of ourselves as a separate being. It’s only through experiencing one adult hand behind our neck and another under our bottom as we’re picked up that we begin to develop the sense that our body has edges. If that touch is responsive to our needs and warm and loving often enough (no parents are perfect, nor is that necessary) then we gain the sense of our body as a good place to be and our self as an acceptable being. We develop an understanding of our boundaries, a respect of our body and its needs and a healthy awareness of our own sensuality that can later grow naturally into our sexuality. Of course our other senses are gathering information and working to meet our needs too: our eyes look into the other’s eyes, our ears listen to voice tones, our noses, lips and tongues work hard too.

Too many people know what it is like to have grown up without loving touch. It’s essential that we adults take responsibility to ensure that future generations of children don’t have to experience that. Bathing a child is just one of the many lovely ways of giving them pleasant physical experiences of their bodies. The task of getting clean the whole body including the genitals, can be safely coupled with loving touch when the adult is clear that is their aim. It’s important not to avoid genitals or the child may get the sense that there’s something wrong with these parts. In fact this can be a good opportunity to be teaching children the names for their body parts as you wash them. Equally importantly, the genitals are not the appropriate places to be tickling, kissing or in any way exploring as we might do with other parts of the body- for example blowing raspberries on a little round tummy. If the adult is seeking titillation then the touch becomes very different for the child; disturbing at the deepest level.

These two factors of staying clear in your own head of what your aim is and understanding and respecting children’s boundaries provide a guide to appropriately touching any age child. Both men and women can struggle to know how to adjust to their children’s changing bodies and needs. Some children will naturally withdraw from such behaviours as cuddles and being naked in front of family members as they grow older. This needs to be respected while still creating new opportunities for closeness and touch that will meet the child’s needs. Others will continue this behaviour past when the adults around them are comfortable with it. Then you will need to take responsibility to address the issue with them in age appropriate ways. For example with a young adolescent boy

who still likes to crawl into his mum's side of the bed on a weekend morning: "I'm glad you still like my hugs but now you're growing up to be a young man it doesn't feel quite right cuddling you in bed like this- maybe you can hop in dad's side and we'll have a family cuddle." For those men or women raising children of the opposite gender on their own it may be best to frankly say "Now you're growing up love it just isn't right any more to have cuddles in bed- lets wait until we're dressed before we have hugs."

Happy children delight in their sensuality. As adults we have the responsibility to hold clear in ourselves the boundary between sensual and sexual and ensure children are kept on the right side of that. We also have the responsibility to manage adult relationships well to avoid the kinds of separation messes that can lead to the accusations that frighten men out of feeling safe to be providing physical affection to children. Anyone needing help with any of these responsibilities should consult a sex therapist without hesitation.

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