

Touch therapy for tiny tots

A massage programme is making its gentle mark on youth programmes and classrooms, writes Karen Kotze

Eva Scherer has made a career out of a touchy subject.

But the massage therapist is determined to promote the benefits of a massage programme for children which she believes can help curb aggression and a range of other ills later in life.

"Our children are touch-deprived, and it shows," Eva says. "It shows in their depression-their suicide."

Eva's answer is a peer massage programme for children which she has introduced to several youth programmes and one primary school.

Her "child connection" technique for schools or playgroups teaches children to massage each other, with only supervision by adults.

Peer massage is par for the course for children in Sweden and Poland, and supporters say it can contribute to lower depression and suicide rates.

Eva was working at the Pakuranga Health Camp for Children in 1988 when she decided to introduce the idea to New Zealand.

Her interest took her to the University of Miami's Touch Research Institute where she learned the techniques to put together her own programme.

Tailoring it to New Zealand children has seen her approach Arif Usmani from Auckland entertainers "The Aunties" to come up with tunes and lyrics to complement the massage movements.

For the classes, children are put into pairs, and learn simple massage techniques for hands, backs and heads. All massages are done fully clothed.

"We only need to teach the children the techniques and supervise to ensure they grasp the context and intention," Eva says. "Sometimes we have to correct aggressive touch when children really thump each other's backs instead of patting."

Eva shays for many children touch has been taboo and they simply need to learn how reach out, and receive positively.

She says parents are worried that their touches will be misinterpreted in a society which is riddled with sexual dangers for children that they simply stop touching their children altogether.

Boys are of particular concern, begin more at risk of developing severe touch deprivation in stoic societies.

Eva says may behavioural outbursts are unconscious manipulations by boys who are willing to accept rough handling or hidings rather than no physical contact at all.

"A simple back rub or stroking the arms, legs or feet can do unspoken wonders for the parent-child connection" she says. "It teaches positive touch and just lets the children feel loved. It's just as good for the parent, or person giving the massage.

Eva's massage programme is part of Mount Albert's YMCA holiday programme, has been used at the Pakuranga Health Camp, part of the normal school day at Marlborough Primary School on the North Shore.

Eva was awarded a North Shore mayoral community award for excellence after the successful Marlborough programme.

Marlborough Principal Christine Wargent syas her children love the massage experience. "It is really sad that all schools haven't taken it on board.... it is so easy, and it works for teachers an kids. Once they've had a massage, the class is quiet and receptive to study, and everyone feels good"

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