

Reach out and hug somebody is the message of massage therapist Eva Scherer.

She is frustrated that people in her adoptive country are afraid of touch.

Ms Scherer says New Zealand is a "low touch" culture and she believes that many of the health and social problems experienced by children may stem from an aversion to touching.

Ms Scherer moved to New Zealand from Poland five years ago. She was amazed to find that her new homeland had high rates of youth suicide and child abuse.

New Zealand was among several Western countries found to be a "low-touch" culture by the Touch Research Institute.

The institute was set up by the University of Miami's School of Medicine in 1982.

Through worldwide research, it established that there are two types of cultures — "high touch", such as France, Italy and Greece, and "low touch", such as New Zealand, Australia, Britain and the United States. Some of the research involved observing couples in cafes for 30 minutes and recording their touching.

In Paris, the "touch rate" was 110 times over half an hour. In Miami, couples made physical contact just twice in the same time.

Researchers also compared physical contact in preschool playgrounds. In Paris, children touched one another affectionately 23 per cent of the time; in Miami, they did so only 3 per cent of the time.

Aggressive touching occurred 37 per cent of the time in the Miami playground, but only 1 per cent in the Paris preschool.

The institute's researchers went on to establish a worldwide correlation between high-touch cultures and low rates of suicide, abuse and depression.

Italy had the lowest rates of suicide and ranked in the highest of high-touch cultures.

"Lack of touch — touch starvation if you like — is one of the major causes of depression and suicide in this country," says Ms Scherer.

She has set up the Touch Love

Losing that loving touch

- Touch deprivation produces:
 - Addiction to sensory stimulation in adulthood (drug abuse).
 - Depressive behaviour.
 - Violent or aggressive behaviour.
 - Difficulty empathising with others.
 - Trouble expressing feelings.
 - Demand for affection.
 - Craving control in all situations.
 - Difficulty with verbal expression.
 - Impaired social maturity.
 - Delays in personal development.

Health Trust to introduce people to educational and practical programmes about touch.

She believes the family unit worldwide is in crisis. With the institute's backing, she wants to deliver "touch for children" programmes through the education and health-care systems.

Ms Scherer's "children massaging children" workshop has already been tried at one primary school, and is included in the YMCA holiday programme.

She says the best way to bring about change in child abuse and suicide is to change behaviour from the beginning, because children under the age of 3 cannot develop properly without touch.

"They have to be stimulated or they are not the child they could be — healthwise or mentally."

Ms Scherer says touch has had some bad publicity and is associated with negative feelings.

"As a society we are afraid of touch," she said. "We suffer from a fear of inappropriate or 'bad' touching."

"But touch belongs to the universal law of life and we are a touch-deprived society. We must not be afraid."

The trust runs workshops to



LIFE GIVING: Eva Scherer says "touch starvation" is a major cause of depression and suicide.

PICTURE / FOTOPRESS

introduce concepts of touch and massage to everyday lives.

"They appear simple but they contain profound messages for our touch-starved society."

Ms Scherer says only trained therapists conduct the workshops, and says Sweden has 9000 teachers trained in therapeutic massage.

"Every day I hear of the great difference message can make in children's lives," she says.

The groups become calmer; children show less aggression, they concentrate more easily and they develop empathy for one another.

Ms Scherer says we have been taught that children do not touch

children — adults touch children, for example by holding their hands.

But she believes teaching children to massage one another's hands and heads can have great benefits in the classroom.

"You can't hit someone you touch. It's a strange thing, you know, but you can't."