

Can touch make a difference?

In the recently released Green Paper the Prime Minister John Key said :

"I'm very concerned that in the past 10 years, despite hundreds of millions of dollars extra being invested across health, education, the benefit system, Child, Youth and Family and the justice system, public services have too often failed the children who need them most."

We need to break the viscous circle of abuse going from generation to generation."

My name is Eva Scherer and I share this concern!

My "Child Connection" registered charity stands for the universal rights of closeness and belonging for all children. The best manifestation of this is through positive touch that helps prevent child abuse, depression, suicide and family violence.

The New Zealand Government's vision for children is that every child thrives, belongs, and achieves. The Green Paper states "About 15 per cent of New Zealand children are at risk of not doing well." Children are most vulnerable when they

are young (under 5 years) because of their developing brain and their dependence on caring adults to provide their basic needs.

Developing children need food and shelter and love. The word "love" means nothing. But touch, cuddling, smiling, holding, singing and interacting, mean everything. Combine all these elements that comprise the expression of "love" and you end up with what the psychologists call "Secure Attachment".

What happens if this is missing?

- Addiction to sensory stimulation in adulthood (sexual abuse, drug use, crime)
- Depressive and autistic behaviour
- Violent and aggressive behaviour
- Difficulty recognising feelings in others
- Trouble recognising own feelings
- Impaired social maturity

(Data British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, 1981, Fahlberg, London)

Maria Montessori claimed that humankind abandoned in the early formative period becomes the worst threat to its own survival. To neglect this essential need for

being nurtured such as experiencing touch and body contact, results in increasing numbers of juvenile and adult males who batter, abuse and rape.

Allan N. Schore, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Bio-behavioural sciences at UCLA Medical School reports:

In the first two years a baby is building the foundation that will dictate behaviour through adulthood. The quality of growth and development is dependent upon emotional, close interaction with parent and/or primary caregiver.

Being loved, nurtured and cared for provides the foundation for balanced emotional development, stability and is the foundation of intelligence. This is because the emotional limbic brain develops first. Emotions are fundamental to the way in which everything else (including the ability to learn facts and skills follow) is built.

Research conducted by Allan N. Shore provides a detailed explanation of broken attachment bonds and the development of right brain processes responsible for feelings of self-esteem, self-reflective awareness, and empathy in the right hemisphere of the brain is involved. [<http://allanschore.com/pdf/SchoreIMHJAttachment.pdf>]

A child will remember a story well under the following circumstances: *There needs to be emotional connection with the topic and with the reading process itself, plus the child needs to be sitting on your lap in the safe, warm cradle of your arm surrounded by the smell of your body and feeling the vibration of your voice. The attachment process involves all the senses and touch is the leading one.*

During activities that involve all the senses, young people's/children's limbic/emotional brain produces endorphins – hormones of happiness which in a growing



brain influence the formation of Rewards Pathways. (<http://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/addiction/reward/>)

These Reward Pathways are the foundation for proper mental, emotional, spiritual and physical development. If the Rewards Pathways is not properly set up in early childhood then a "band-aid" is often applied later, with antidepressants being one management tool. Prozac has been demonstrated to have suicidal effect on children and youths (*Columbine school shooting the child was on Prozac for several years*). New Zealand suicide statistics tell us that 11 people die from suicide every week, that 10 per cent of the deaths of New Zealand 10-14 year olds are suicide and our rates of youth suicide are not only the highest in the developed world, but double those of the United States and Australia and five times more than the UK. (<http://kate-raue.blogspot.co.nz/2011/01/casper-suicide-prevention-strategy.html>)

With social and economical changes, many working parents simply have no time for their children or for themselves, let alone investigating why their children need a simple hug! The "three generational family fabric" has almost disappeared. The only thing that has not changed is the universal law of attachment - children still need to be loved and attached. And here is an opportunity for mainstream education to be involved in helping with the problem.

Touch Research Institute (TRI) – an institution solely devoted to the study of touch and massage has divided countries into 2 categories: low touch culture countries and high touch culture countries. In 1996 they conducted research simultaneously in Paris (France is a high touch culture country) and in Miami (US is a low touch culture country). Researchers observed couples in coffee shops. They were counting how many times within half an hour they touched each other: whether by holding hands, touching cheeks, leg to leg under the table or sitting on the lap. In Paris on average couples touched each other 130 times, in Miami 4 times! The Touch Research Institute ranks different countries depending on how "touchy" they are: Italy is at the very top and New Zealand, unfortunately, at the very bottom.

Yes, we are not a very "touchy" culture.

Kiwis are also believed to have one of the largest personal spaces in the world! They have a large distance around them to keep safe and prevent touch.

This does not help build secure attachment, which is the main factor in proper brain development. Securely attached children do not become vulnerable children.

Daniel Goleman suggests in his book *"Emotional Intelligence"* that we can shape our emotional habits – how adept or how inept we become in these areas can be shaped particularly in early childhood. The world-wide trend for the present generation of children to be more troubled emotionally, more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive is most disturbing.

Children of depressed, cold, violent mothers, the neglected children – whose nanny is often the TV set – don't have their emotional brain – the limbic brain – properly formed.

There is however a chance to change their behaviour, by providing new, positive experiences at school, kindergarten or other educational establishments. Children who practice massage in the classroom will be better for their own kids when they grow up. The vicious circle can be broken.



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