In recent years, there has been great controversy over the use of touch in our schools. Some experts believe that because of past abuses and current risks, under no circumstances should adults touch children. Others, however, claim that “appropriate” touching not only should be allowed in special instances (e.g., when consoling or praising), but should be encouraged, especially with very young children.

For the past 20 years the trend toward abstaining from touch in schools has been growing in direct response to the growth in sensitivity toward the problems of sexual harassment, molestation, and abuse. In an effort to keep one step ahead of sexual offenders, more and more schools are sending the message to adults everywhere – hands off!

Compounding this situation are laws and ethical codes that interpret touching in vague and sometimes unrealistic ways. Is it any wonder that most teachers, counselors, and even parents now refrain from adding that personal touch to their interactions with children? Touching children in schools has become virtually taboo.

However, not touching children could be considered another form of abuse – neglect. By demonstrating a more aloof, distant style of interacting with children, and avoiding any physical contact at all costs, we may be sending them the message that physical expressions of warmth and affection, such as a hug or a pat on the back is unacceptable. Meanwhile, the overwhelming prevalence of violent and aggressive physical contact, which is everywhere on TV and in movies and video games, might by comparison seem more acceptable. And some states and school districts are even contemplating a return to corporal punishment in schools.

What message would this send to children about touching? These contradictions lead to a whole new set of problems for children, as they struggle to learn what is and is not acceptable social behavior. Where do we begin to start solving these problems? It may be helpful to think of touching in simple terms of good and bad – though this leaves a lot of room for
interpretation. For instance, is a pat on the back okay? Should an educator or counselor hug a despondent child?

Just what situations warrant touch?

The results of recent studies show that children, too, although more aware of touch than ever before, still need our direction. What is missing are guidelines and tools for educating students, parents, and educators about touching and how it can be used beneficially. A consistent approach is crucial to serve as a model for what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate touching. This could also help to ease fears that any sex offenses might escape scrutiny.

The Touch Test

A first step to help everyone distinguish types of touching might be to apply what’s called the Touch Test. This test has only one requirement: It simply asks, would you allow a stranger, teacher, coach, counselor, or anyone with whom you didn’t have a close personal or familial relationship, to do this to you? It’s easy to understand and just as easy to use.

For instance, some examples of permissible or appropriate touching might be shaking hands, patting someone on the back, or restraining someone for safety reasons. Examples of inappropriate touching might be kissing, stroking someone’s hair, spanking, or prolonged hugging. Obviously not every instance of touching will be as simple to consider as these. However, the premise of the Touch Test is to help us begin looking at touch in terms of a balance between good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate.

How can we be certain that children and adults are in tune with each other when it comes to appropriate touch? Because parents touch their children in various ways and for various purposes during children’s early development, it’s often difficult for children to discriminate between good and bad touching. Yet educating children and adults about preventing child abuse appears to be producing effective results. One study shows that even at the grade school level, children have the capacity to understand inappropriate touching.

This kind of awareness education with children may eventually make it safe again to incorporate “appropriate touch” as an education tool. In fact, by sending a consistent, ongoing message to students as they move from kindergarten through grade 12, teachers, parents, and counselors can create a positive sense of the value of touching. At the same time, they will be reminding children what kinds of touching are inappropriate.

Regardless of personal opinions on the issue, the question of whether to touch or not to touch is unlikely to go away any time soon. That being the case, educators and parents need to work together to ensure that children remain protected from harmful contact, and that adults find ways to demonstrate positive kinds of physical contact. Educators and parents can use the following strategies to help bring touch back into schools in a productive, helpful way.
Be part of the solution. Studies have demonstrated that parents can be effective instructors regarding touch and, in conjunction with schools, can create effective personal “touch tests” for their children. Parents must petition educators and administrators to assure that schools are safe for their children. By the same token, they also must be willing to trust that their children will thrive in a system where acceptable touch is used by adults.

Practice what we preach. Though many state and local governments provide little in the way of laws regarding touch, parents can lobby to ensure that standards which address touching are put in place. For instance, the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) offers these guidelines for educators who choose to touch:

1. Consider the age, sex and perception (maturity) of the child.
2. Use touch only to praise or comfort.
3. Ensure there is another adult present.
4. Briefly touch only the shoulder or arm.

Provide community support. Obviously, the possibility of harassment, abuse, and molestation warrants close public scrutiny. At the same time, however, parents need to help reinforce the message that it is also a good thing to touch children in appropriate ways and at appropriate times. Participating in parent-teacher and support groups, or petitioning the school board, can lead to positive change in perception about touching.

Remain vigilant. Parents must gain commitment from school districts and governing boards that everyone within the school system be “in touch with touching”. Asking that educators attend special programs, seminars, and in-service training are some of the ways to ensure professionals keep abreast of current development in the area of touching.

We must continue our fight to protect innocent children from abuse. However, parents, teachers, counselors and administrators should not have to think about the implications of patting a student on the back for a job well done, or putting an arm around a young man or woman as a comforting gesture. These can be powerful ways to show students they are loved, cared for, and safe. Perhaps even more importantly, it’s possible that human touch can provide us with one critical way to get back in touch with today’s youth.