

A LINE ON LIFE

5/22/95

A Touching Story *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

This touching story is not as much about emotion as it is about touching. Even so, touching does cause strong emotional responses. Touching is not just sexual or intimate. We use touch to communicate with acquaintances and strangers as well.

Emotional responses to touching depend on how, when and where people are touched. In our American culture, women average 12 touches a day, while men average only 8. Men tend to limit themselves to ritual touching like shaking hands or clapping others on the shoulder or upper back. In sporting events — especially football — a pat on the butt may also be acceptable. (However, this is not recommended outside of sporting situations.)

Certain parts of our body — hands, arms and shoulders — may be touched by acquaintances and even strangers (under the right circumstances) without causing a negative response. In contrast, your head, neck, body, legs and feet are typically taboo for touching except by people with whom you are intimate. Of course, there are exceptions. By disrobing for a physician's examination, you are giving the doctor nonverbal permission to touch. Even so, the doctor's touching as part of a medical exam still may make you feel uncomfortable.



The effects of touching — even nonsexual touching — are extremely powerful. Students touched briefly in their interactions with librarians rated both the library and the librarians more positively. When psychiatric patients are touched by their nurses, their verbal interactions increase. In a 1985 psychological study, waitresses briefly touched diners on the palm, on the shoulder, or not at all. The diners who were touched left significantly larger tips than those who were not touched. Generally, brief, gentle touches to the hands, arms or shoulders tend to lead to positive reactions from those who are touched.

Although touching can be an extremely positive experience, it can also lead to problems. In the workplace, touches may be seen as being

sexually suggestive and be interpreted as sexual harassment. Likewise, sexual abuse charges against a few childcare workers have made many people more fearful. Beside parents worrying about their children, many daycare workers, teachers and baby-sitters (especially males) have become wary of touching children in their care.

We can combat these fears by teaching our children the difference between "*good touches*" and "*bad touches*." Good touches make the child feel good and positive about the situation and the relationship, while bad touches make the child feel upset, uncomfortable or uncertain. Once they are able to distinguish these feelings, children need to be given the right to say "*No*" to being touched. Similarly, you should not force your children to submit to unwanted kisses and hugs -- even from close relatives.

If we train our children to rebuff unwanted touches, as adults, can't we have the courage to do the same?

If a child can say "No" to uncomfortable touching, the same is true for anyone else in subordinate positions — students, employees and others. In fact, if you are uncertain that a touch is friendly, even this doubt can make you feel very uncomfortable.

Under these conditions, there is a reliable method of distinguishing between a friendly touch and potential sexual harassment. However, you need to be assertive enough to make the toucher aware of both your discomfort and your desire to have the touching stopped. This can be done by calmly stating, "***This makes me feel uncomfortable. I want you to stop touching me.***" (This is in contrast to an aggressive response like, "*Get your dirty hands off of me!*") It also helps to say it loud enough, so others can hear your request.

You gain insight into the intent of others from the way they respond to your request. If the person immediately stops touching and apologizes for making you uncomfortable, the touch was friendly. In contrast, if the person continues touching and belittles you for being "*too sensitive*" or "*too cold*," this is the start of sexual harassment. If the touching doesn't stop after the request is repeated, then you can be more assertive by threatening to press charges of sexual harassment. If the behavior still doesn't stop, aggressive responses may be warranted.

With these options at hand, we can still enjoy the positive aspects of touching without unreasonable fear of its misuse. A soft, brief touch of another person indicates caring and acceptance better than any words ever can. Comfortable touching can make you feel closer to others, so "*reach out and touch someone.*" (Now wasn't that a touching story?)

* Adapted from Simons, Irwin & Drinnin's *Psychology: The Search for Understanding*, West Publishing, 1987, page 312.