

Special Report:

# No-Touch Zone

The Banning of Affection in Public Schools

By Moryt Milo

## When

Tristan Juhan was a fifth-grade student at Park Elementary School in Mill Valley, California, he had a crush on one of his classmates. For Valentine's Day, Tristan gave the girl a rose and a peck on the cheek. His behavior had him "hailed up on the carpet for what was called an inappropriate display of affection," Tristan's father, Deane Juhan, says. "His teacher told my son, if he saw any more displays of this behavior he would not be allowed on the field trip at the end of the year."

What happened to Tristan was not an isolated incident. Throughout the United States, children displaying innocent affection often contradict school policies. In North Carolina, a 6-year-old boy was suspended for a day and barred from a school ice-cream party for kissing a classmate. In New York, a 7-year-old boy was suspended for five days for kissing a girl and tearing a button from her skirt. He had tried to copy his favorite storybook character, Corduroy, a well-loved bear missing a button from his clothes.

After Tristan's incident, Juhan says, the teacher backed off after speaking to him. (Juhan is a Trager Work® practi-

tioner, educator, and author of the popular books *Job's Body, a Handbook for Bodywork* and *Touched by the Goddess: The Physical, Psychological, & Spiritual Powers of Bodywork*, and a former member of *Massage Magazine's* editorial advisory board.) But a couple of years later, when Juhan went to a middle-school meeting held to discuss school sexuality issues, he was appalled by the attitude of parents and school administrators.

The meeting had been called because a parent found a note alluding to sexual behavior among students, and parents demanded the school address issues of inappropriate and appropriate displays of student affection, Juhan says.

After listening to the discussion, Juhan stood up and asked those attending if parent-child relationships had deteriorated to a level where parents now prohibited their children from any physical affection among their peers.

"Aren't we supposed to teach our children how to be responsible and love each other?" Juhan asked. "What is this 'just say no' to affection?"

After the meeting, several parents approached Juhan and said they were glad he spoke up—but most admitted they were afraid to say anything.

## Defining appropriate touch

Over the past 20 years, the definition of appropriate behavior—specifically, good touch among classmates or between teachers and students—has become unclear. In thousands of school handbooks across the nation, even the simple act of holding hands is often considered an inappropriate and prohibited display of affection. And due to a lack of consistent standards, the past two decades have seen U.S. schools increasingly disallowing any type of touch, including displays of affection like pats on the shoulder and hugs between teachers and students, and hugs, pecks on the cheek and hand-holding among stu-

dents. This is in response to a steady stream of successful lawsuits brought against teachers, school districts and fellow students by students claiming physical and emotional abuse. And as educators wrestle with these issues, the definition of good touch becomes muddled.

Many professionals fault the litigious nature of American society, years of unchecked abusive behavior toward students and by students, and our culture's confused attitudes toward the body as the reasons why good touch is being eliminated from schools. However, there is a huge body of research that has consistently demonstrated the importance of healthy touch, and which shows that good touch results in less aggressive behavior and a healthier outlook on life.

The results of these studies range from the classic research done by H.F. Harlow in 1958, on baby monkeys that chose snuggling with soft cuddly mothers that offered no food over wire mothers that provided food, to the 1999 study by Touch Research Institute Director Tiffany Field, Ph.D., that compared the amount of touch American and French preschoolers received from their peers and caregivers. Field observed that American preschoolers received less touch than their French counterparts. "The most provocative findings were that Parisian children receiving



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significantly more touch were also significantly less aggressive than the American children," Field stated.

But years of research supporting the importance of good touch cannot change the one single element that has skewed attitudes and changed policies toward touch in schools: fear of lawsuits. Education professionals are so concerned about student-teacher sexual allegations, the misinterpretation of caring behavior, allegations of peer harassment among students and hearsay, that teachers are forced to think twice before patting a student on the back for a job well done or comforting them with a hug when they get a poor grade.

## Their hands are tied

With an array of legal cases heard over the past decade, and decisions often in favor of parents and children versus educators, teachers find themselves torn between wanting to show compassionate touch and having their hands tied by school policies.

During his teacher orientation, Josh Maisel, a high-school history teacher at Fremont High School in Sunnyvale, California, was warned against any form of student touching. The 28-year-old was also told to make sure he was never alone after school with a female stu-

dent, to always have another teacher present. If a student stayed after school, he was to always keep his classroom door open.

Maisel says that he can't be himself under these conditions. "There are times when I might feel especially bad, for example if one of the girls fails a test," he says. "I want to comfort her. Maybe put my arm around her shoulder. I'm sure she wouldn't mind—but I just don't do it."

Until his retirement in 2000 from Rogers Middle School in San Jose, California, Greg Kimoto had been a science teacher for 38 years. Because he believes that touching is powerful energy, he used a handshake as his "substitute hug."

"My rationale for the handshake was I knew kids needed to be touched and I needed to find some appropriate way that fit into the legal system," Kimoto says. "When you hug someone you are saying, 'I value you. I respect you. I feel for you. I support you.'"

Parents who also work in the massage profession are equally frustrated. When Juhan offered to come into his son's middle-school class and show students how to relax by demonstrating neck and shoulder rubs, he says, "the teachers were aghast I would suggest such a thing. This was not even on their chart of possibility. They said, 'Absolutely not. We would be in legal trouble in 30 seconds.'"

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Nan Stein, Ed.D., is a senior research scientist at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and author of *Classrooms and Courtrooms: Facing Sexual Harassment in K-12 Schools*. "It's absurd to outlaw touch in the name of preventing sexual harassment," she says. But still, superintendents and teacher unions have sent out memos changing positions from some touch to no touching at all. These policy changes are subjective decisions, determined by individual school districts or local teacher unions, Stein explains.

Stein cites the following example to prove her point that our society has become paranoid about touch in schools: "Touch was OK between the shoulder and wrist. But then people realized shoulders are where girls' bra- straps are, so it shifted to elbow and wrist."

As a former middle-school teacher, Stein was a very "touchy" teacher. "If I didn't have touch in my repertoire, I would have been very restrained," she says. "Touch means everything from 'nice job,' to 'wait your turn,' to 'you look a little bummed-out today.'"

## No standards

Except for Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which is a federal law that prohibits sexual discrimination, including sexual harassment in public schools that receive federal funding, it is left to each school district to interpret and set the standards for appropriate touch. Federal or state laws offer very little guidance. So in Oberlin, Ohio's Langston Middle School, handholding is not permitted, as it is considered by the school to illustrate a lack of maturity and bad citizenship. Across the state line, in Missouri, handholding at Liberty High School is considered acceptable

behavior. But in Monroe-Woodbury Middle School, located in Central Valley, New York, the student handbook states that holding hands among students is considered in "poor taste," creates a slowdown in hallway traffic, and therefore is not permitted. The interpretations and consequences of such behavior are determined by individual school districts.

In the state of Washington, clearing up the gray area of appropriate touch is up to Jerry Painter, general counsel for 74,000 teachers in the state.

After 20 years of handling cases involving issues of inappropriate teacher-student behavior, Painter decided it was time to go out to the schools and explain what gets people in trouble and how they can prevent that. He also decided that the schools need a set of working standards. For almost 15 years he has presented legally safe standards for teachers. For example, he will tell educators it is OK to give children side hugs, but not frontal hugs.

Painter also presents training programs for those wanting to introduce touch into the classroom. Yet he says even now, if you were to put 20 educators in a room and asked them about touch, "the only agreement you would have right at the beginning is you don't touch people where the swimming suit goes. After that, [responses are] all over the place."

Painter acknowledges that 20 years ago attitudes about touch were much less reserved, and that teachers were much more comfortable touching students. It was OK to give a student any kind of hug. But now teachers don't know what to do.

This shift in attitude was triggered by a stream of sexual-abuse lawsuits against teachers, and by the failure of school administrators to acknowledge that the problem of abusive and sexual touch existed. Recent examples include a 44-year-old teacher and coach in ► | continued on page 90

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continued from page 88 | ► Minnesota pleading guilty and being sentenced to six years in prison for sexually abusing male students. In Washington, a 31-year-old teacher was sentenced to 18 months in prison for having sex with a 16-year-old female student. And in Maine, two men were awarded a \$1.6 million settlement after being repeatedly abused by a teacher in the 1980s. These examples are just a drop in the sea of court cases nationwide.

### From one extreme to another

Asked to draw a timeline, Painter explains that before the 1980s, attitudes toward abuse simply went unchecked. "Many saw [this] as being a major injustice to our children," Painter says. "But rather than adjusting, we hit the other extreme."

That extreme included a barrage of lawsuits and endless accusations over the slightest infractions. Decisions were made on emotion, without any scientific data to support opinions, because people wanted immediate solutions to the problem and overreacted, Painter says. He cites the example of a teacher accused of abuse because he touched an injured child's pelvic region while trying to help the child.

"Now, more and more school districts and our courts see that [these extremes] are just as abusive as what we saw before," Painter says.

Tiffany Field agrees with Painter's assessment and adds, "We mandated that kids are not to be touched in the school systems, but what in fact has happened is child abuse has increased *despite* the mandate—and children are suffering in other ways from not being touched."

However, for some in the touch field, initial touch restrictions made sense. It was corporal punishment, the disciplinary practice of spanking, hitting and paddling students by teachers and principals, now banned in 27 U.S. states, that sparked initial debates about appropriate touch in school.

As a small boy, Tom Myers, a Rolwing® bodywork practitioner for more than 25 years, and a contributor to *Massage Magazine*, recalls a teacher who would grab him by the throat and shake him.

"I think the original reason to remove touch from the classroom was beneficial, because its use was misguided," Myers says. "[Removing touch] stopped teachers from mishandling children." But, Myers concludes, as time continued, the original intent was forgotten and "we threw the baby out with the bath water," he says. "The nastiness of life was eliminated—along with part of our joy."

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## Zero tolerance

The elimination of all touch has subsequently filtered down from teacher-student relations to student-student relations. Suddenly, a harmless peck on the cheek grows into sexual harassment because educators lack the understanding or willingness to provide proper staff or student training to help define inappropriate and appropriate behavior. Because of lawsuits, which held schools legally and financially accountable for their lack of action, zero tolerance toward *all* touch is becoming school code.

Painter does not believe zero tolerance is the right solution, because it deprives a child of his or her socialization skills.

"[Students] do not know the difference between good or bad [touch], or what is a reasonable or an unreasonable situation," he says. "This is all part of what school is about. If youth are not allowed to hug and hold hands in a protective and progressive manner, all of a sudden they will go crazy at 18 years of age."

Massage therapist Marybets Sinclair, who is a proponent of healthy touch for children, sees zero-tolerance policies as a contradiction in terms. Children are told that hugging and showing affection is inappropriate or wrong,

she says, yet information about sexuality is relentless.

"Mixed messages add to confusion," Sinclair says. "This is why good school education programs are needed to identify healthy and unhealthy touch."

"People are touch-hungry, starved for touch," Sinclair continues. "Little kids are in daycare a lot, no longer with family members full time." This lack of exposure to everyday family hugging, snuggling and affection results in children not understanding what is, and is not, appropriate touch, Sinclair says.

Educators also emphasize the importance of re-establishing a strong and loving home that offers healthy touch. Stein does not believe teachers should be the primary providers of touch, saying this is the job of parents. But she also acknowledges that providing children with consistent, healthy touch has become difficult with so many children in daycare and with both parents working.

Those in the touch profession feel that both bringing touch back into the home *and* introducing it into schools while children are young could help shift attitudes and understanding toward appropriate behavior.

In Sweden, more than 9,000 teachers have been trained in massage, and have taught their students how to massage each other. (See "Students Benefit" | continued on page 95

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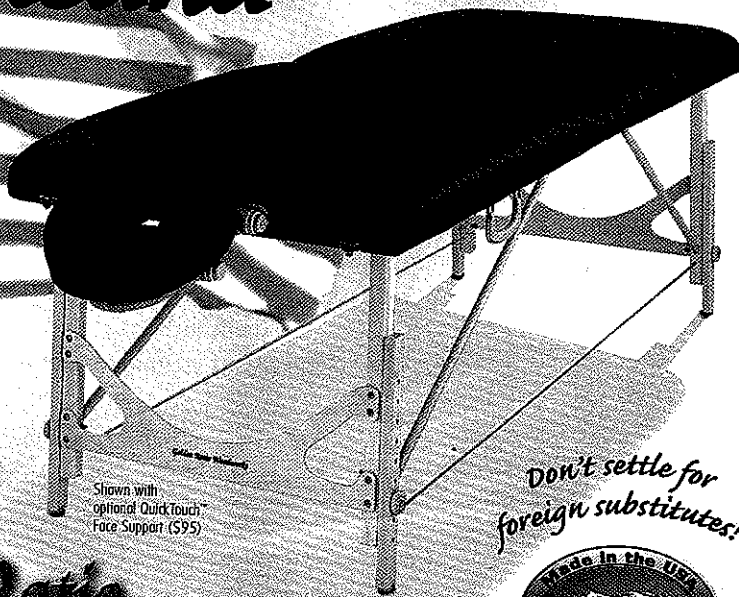
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continued from page 91 | ▶ from In-Class Massage," page 89.) The students massage each other, rubbing backs, necks, scalps, faces, arms and fingers. In a recent study, sixth graders reported feeling more relaxed and tolerant toward their fellow students after learning the massage routine.

One 11-year-old student wrote, "Massage is wonderful. We would like to have it once a week." And another sixth-grade student described massage as helping her to relax. She found touch very soothing and wrote, "I also give my mother massage when she is stressed. She loves that."

In the United States, The Upledger Institute is working to teach students healthy touch. (See "Compassionate Touch In U.S. Schools," page 92.)

These are the types of programs that advocates of touch say need to be introduced and integrated into our public school system.

### Changing attitudes

Field sees a new generation that uses the right kind of touch—rubbing someone's back, head, or shoulders—as the key to changing attitudes. If families get more in touch with each other and understand how good this is for their children, Field believes, parents will recognize the importance of touch and may even encourage teachers to touch again.

Juhan says the task ahead is a difficult one. He believes American culture is hostile toward touch and baffled about its benefits, and that these are major reasons our culture has so many problems when it comes to dealing with affection.

Sinclair points out that some of the problems with understanding touch are a result of political voices that do not represent the majority.

"Whether we agree with their philosophy or not, this thinking is being pushed into the mainstream and affecting how people view themselves and those around them," she says.

These minority philosophies are what massage therapists like Juhan and Sinclair see as panicking educators and triggering the current over-the-edge attitude toward any form of touch. It has left teachers without satisfying solutions and children testing the limits.

Perhaps the easiest way to put the entire problem into perspective is reflecting on a comment Kimoto made when asked about touch: "I don't blame parents for wanting to protect their children. Some issues like violence and weapons should fall under the zero-tolerance rule. But no child is ever going to die from holding hands." M

*Moryt Milo is a free-lance writer who lives in Northern California with her husband and two children.*



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