A hug is a wholesome thing. At least at one time it was. Most people considered a hug genial and benevolent. It conveyed a positive meaning: a praise, an expression of encouragement, or consolation. A hug meant someone was being friendly.

Those were the days before sexual harassment issues and sexual assault cases. Now a hug often is suspect. The motivation for touch frequently is questioned. These days the news is filled with stories of sexual abuse. People get into serious legal trouble for hugging or touching another person inappropriately.

Public and private schoolteachers and day care providers are keenly aware of this. They are leery about hugging and touching learners, children, and consumers. Sexual abuse lawsuits can destroy reputations and careers. Teachers and providers are asking themselves if hugging or touching is worth a personal calamity.

**At Church**

Church workers and leaders no longer consider this a secular issue. We have a history of using hugs, pats on the back, and touches on the shoulder to express Christian love. Now we’re advised against hugging and touching. Preschoolers, children, and adults with mental retardation have been taught that some people hug and touch in bad ways. Not all hugs and touches are good.

Some of these learners have a difficult time discerning the difference between good and bad hugs or touch. Some who have been abused or have tactile issues simply cannot tolerate being touched and respond negatively to even an appropriate hug or touch.

The issue is not clear-cut. The hug a teacher thinks is merely friendly may seem too long, too tight, or too close to someone else. For such reasons many lawyers tell church workers it is safer never to hug or touch a learner.

**Hugging Is Important**

Teachers of learners with special education concerns realize the importance of hugs and touch. We find this kind of advice hard to follow.

A hug is a highly effectual way to communicate with special learners. We know it, and we use hugs to say “Good job!” or “You’re important.” A hug can prevent potentially violent behavior or calm a hyperactive child. A hug can relay security or help the learner develop confidence and trust in her teacher.

Hugs are important to our learners and to the relationships they establish with us. A caring hug can be an effective way to welcome a child to a new class. A light touch or arm across the shoulders can reassure the embarrassed adult with mental retardation.

As nonverbal communication a hug can be understood. It’s an excellent technique for establishing a positive learning environment. Most special learners are highly motivated by a hug, and their teachers, both in age-group and self-contained classes, choose to hug them.

**Set Guidelines**

We know hugging and touching are basic to positive human relationships. The Bible gives us poetic examples of the way God reaches down to touch us, take us by the hand, draw us to Himself in gestures of His love. We know that Jesus brought physical healing with His touch. We also know that within social customs of His day, Jesus hugged and even kissed His friends and disciples.

But our social customs and mores are different. Because the public is extremely suspicious of hugs and touch, some of us settle into a blanket hands-off policy. We simply avoid hugging and touching our learners at all. That way we’re not at risk.

Many of us want to use hugs when it’s appropriate and meaningful. You may think as we do. You
fear the lack of interaction between you and your learners, so you can’t support a blanket no-hug/no-touch policy.

How might you handle this issue? Consider these four guidelines for hugging and touching learners today.

1. **Only hug a learner when another learner or adult is present.** A more honest way to say this: Always have a witness. In a society uneasy about touch, the purpose of a hug easily can be misconstrued (and it often is). In practice this guideline serves to protect the learner as well as the teacher. Your learner will feel safer receiving a hug, and you will feel safer giving it. If you teach alone, consider giving a round of hugs to all learners or leading everyone in a gentle group hug.

2. **Get permission.** Inform parents, care providers, or adult learners that you may give hugs on certain occasions. They’ll let you know how they feel about this or if there are special circumstances or past experiences you may need to know about. Some people don’t like to be hugged or touched even by family members. Never force a hug or touch on any learner. Allow him to express his choice. He may have been told no one should touch him, or she may have a bad connotation about touch. Remember that with some children or adults, a tense situation may be intensified by a hug or a touch.

3. **Don’t hug below the shoulders.** Possibly you’ve heard this advice: Before you hug a learner, think how you would want a person who is not a close friend or family member to hug you. Most of us interpret a hug around the waist as intimate and personal. Shoulder hugs and side hugs are both effective and respectful.

4. **Keep the hug age appropriate.** Some teachers say they hug younger and middle-age children but never hug older children or youth. If you choose to hug an older child or youth, know how she will feel about it. Be careful not to invade her sense of personal space.

Teachers of adults with mental retardation need to model when a hug is appropriate. These adults need to learn what is acceptable in the real world.

They often want to hug everyone they meet, especially at church. Teach them that a handshake or light pat on the shoulder is usually best when greeting or comforting each other.

Teachers need to remember these adults can be highly aware of their sexuality. Most male teachers realize they should not hug learners, male or female, no matter the situation. A brief touch on the shoulder is the closest they should come to a hug. Female teachers should be aware that male learners also can misinterpret hugs and should exercise the same caution.

To hug or not to hug? You must decide the answer to this question. You must give thought to the matter beforehand. Even with good guidelines, you won’t always have time to think through a moment’s action. The danger of being misunderstood still can pose a risk that can lead to a potential accusation or court case.

Is it worth it? You may think appropriate hugs and touches are worthwhile to your learners and to your teaching. The time it takes to form these personal guidelines also is worthwhile as you set good boundaries. When the brief teaching moment arises in which an appropriate hug or touch is needed, you’re ready to share a safe hug or touch.

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