

Pedophiles and the Regulation of Hugging

Concerns about protecting children may deprive them of important physical contact.

BY KATHRYN SHELTON AND RICHARD B. MCKENZIE

Researchers have shown that many child victims of sexual abuse face a variety of emotional problems that they can carry with them throughout much of their lives, ranging from feelings of guilt, truancy, and unusual aggression, to suicidal tendencies. Pennsylvania State University, the Catholic Church, daycare centers, camps, scouting groups, and many public and private schools have rightfully been brought under legal and moral fire for ignoring and harboring—and possibly covertly condoning—pedophiles who use their positions of authority to lure victims. Such institutions have paid, and will continue to pay, dearly for their errant ways both in terms of financial penalties and in the loss of public trust.

Convicted pedophiles have been given long prison sentences and—maybe more punishing—life sentences of being branded as “sexual deviants,” with serious restrictions on where they can live and work. (See “Do Sex Offender Registries Make Us Less Safe?” Summer 2012.) Former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky has effectively been sentenced to life in prison for his convictions on 45 counts of child molestation. The stature of the late Joe Paterno, the legendary Penn State football coach, has been torn down figuratively and literally for his and other university officials’ complicity in enabling

Sandusky to continue to seduce his victims within the halls of Penn State’s athletic facilities.

Beyond the abused victims, there is another troubling legacy of these widely reported instances of child molestation: the emergence of broad institutional restrictions on adult contact with the children in their care. As argued below, hugging and other forms of normal physical contact are important to the emotional and behavioral development of children. Prohibitions and limits on hugs can extend the harm done by pedophiles to literally millions of children, especially those who are disadvantaged.

The Anti-Hugging Movement

More than two-thirds of all child molesters are members of their victims’ families. Only 10 percent of molesters are strangers to their victims. No one really knows how many pedophiles remain at large, protected by their victims’ guilt and fear that disclosure will be to no avail. Reports and investigations may reduce to “he said/she said” conflicts that leave the victims unprotected from retribution. Child welfare researchers agree that a substantial majority of child sexual abuse goes unreported and only a minor fraction of the reported cases are substantiated. And no one should assume that courts always convict accused offenders of substantiated cases or impose long sentences and heavy fines. A judge in New York recently sentenced a pedophile to only two years in prison for sexually preying on a young boy (with the case soon taken over by federal investigators because of the lenient sentence) and another judge in Canada gave a pedophile only five years for groping a 13-year-old girl.

KATHRYN SHELTON is a research assistant in the O’Neil Center for Global Markets and Freedom at Southern Methodist University. RICHARD MCKENZIE is professor emeritus in the Merage School of Business at the University of California, Irvine.

Wendy Goldberg and Paul Zak provided the authors with a number of helpful substantive comments. Karen McKenzie offered editorial refinements.



ILLUSTRATION BY MORGAN BALLARD

What is not appreciated is how pedophiles have indirectly harmed tens of millions of children, especially disadvantaged children, whom the pedophiles have never touched. This harm comes in the form of institutional policies on how supervising adults can interact—or, rather, not interact—with children. In the main, incidences of pedophilia, both proven and unproven, have led to institutional regulations that restrict adult caregivers, teachers, ministers, and coaches—among other adults who have regular contact with children—from hugging (or even touching) children under their care and instruction. For fear of being wrongly accused of child molestation, many adults have increased the distance they stay from children.

Beginnings of the movement | In 1983, the first accusations of child molestation were made against teachers and assistants at the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, Calif. The initial accusations set off a media firestorm against the accused (and all other alleged) child molesters, effectively convicting them in the eyes of the public. Yet none of the McMartin charges were supported by convictions at trials held over the next seven years. Nevertheless, the McMartin case gave rise to a series of questionable child molestation charges across several countries. In 1992, Peter Ellis, a child-care worker in New Zealand, began serving seven years in jail for a conviction of 16 molestation charges. That same year, a child abuse scandal rocked Sas-

katchewan. And in 1994, a daycare center in Brazil came under fire for allegations of abuse. All of those cases were considered controversial and lacking in evidence. The questionable nature of many allegations and the slew of proven priest molestation cases that have rocked the Catholic Church over the last three decades—as much as the desire to avoid incidents of actual child abuse—motivated the development of institutional policies for physical contact between adults and children.

The movement to restrict hugging emerged in 1983 when Pam Church created the “Good-Touch/Bad-Touch” curriculum after learning that her children had been sexually abused. Designed to teach 1st- through 6th-grade students about abuse prevention, the curriculum has since been revised 11 times, is used by over 6,000 educators, and operates in most states. Age-appropriate programs teach children “body safety” rules through an interactive syllabus intended to help them feel confident in saying “no.” In 2005, the program was acquired by Childhelp, the leading nonprofit organization for preventing child abuse, which now operates under the name “Speak Up, Be Safe.” Almost 30 years after the implementation of Good-Touch/Bad-Touch, other related policies have been implemented by thousands of schools, churches, and childcare centers.

To thwart potentially inappropriate contact between their staff members and children, hordes of institutions across the country and around the world have instituted “hugging policies.” Some institutions have banned hugs of all kinds to prevent perceived sexual advances by staff members toward children and to protect their legal liability. Schools in New Jersey, Florida, Arizona, and elsewhere have made hugging an offense punishable by suspension or expulsion, even for children hugging one another.

Associations of coaches in several sports at several academic levels, from elementary to college, warn their members to limit physical contact with their players. For instance, on a coaches clinic webpage for the (North Carolina) Tarheel Swimming Association is the following admonition:

When a coach touches an athlete as part of instruction, the coach should do so in direct view of others and inform the athlete of what he/she is doing prior to the initial contact. Touching athletes should be minimized outside the boundaries of what is considered normal instruction. Appropriate interaction would include high fives, fist bumps, side-to-side hugs and handshakes.

Other coaches associations’ websites display similar warnings with nearly verbatim language. (Notably, Penn State has a long-standing, explicit policy for bidding inappropriate hugging among all members of the Penn State community, with the policy broad enough to apply to hugs between children who come on campus for athletic camps conducted by coaches and staff members.)

While foster care agencies in search of foster parents point to the good feelings parents can provide their foster children and can receive from hugs, many foster care handbooks discourage extended full frontal hugs for children in care—children who would seem to have a special need for hugs. Although hugging

policies vary by state and agency, Family Link Foster and Adoption Agency in Texas specifically forbids hugging in its client brochure. Many others have instituted “appropriate hugging” policies, backed up with instruction for staff, on how children should be hugged from the side. Legal and liability insurance threats that can emerge from real or perceived cases (or falsely claimed cases) of inappropriate contact also pose a real threat to child caregivers, and caregivers therefore restrict or abandon all forms of appropriate touching. In its newsletter, the Wake County (N.C.) Public Employees union warned its readers in 2012:

Be careful. Learn side-to-side hugs. Quickly duck full hugs. Create a special greeting for students: a word, a smile, or hand signal, so that they know you don’t encourage physical contact. There may have been a time when it was normal for teachers to show affection for their students without fear of criminal charges, but that time is over. We live in a society where people leap to conclusions, file charges, and lawsuits. When around your students, you must be the responsible adult, draw the line, and protect yourself.

A Catholic priest in Grand Haven, Mich., Rev. William Langlois, gained media attention earlier this year when he announced that he would stop embracing children at Mass and instead offer “fist-bumps.” Langlois had not been accused of any wrongdoing, but he justified the decision as necessary given current concerns about child abuse. A parody of this dilemma is portrayed in a *Simpsons* episode in which Bart falls and loses consciousness, yet Principal Skinner declines to resuscitate him for fear of a lawsuit.

The Church of England, which is facing a multiplicity of accusations and charges involving child molestation, now advises its priests to “handle” children as little as possible, including avoiding holding babies during baptism, and to never be alone with children or take them home in their cars (even when the children have been inadvertently left in church by their parents) for fear of charges of child molestation. One priest who talked to us about the new baptism guidelines admitted that to date he has not followed the Church’s advice, but that “I expect the day will come.”

Unintended Consequences of Anti-Hugging Regulations

Understandably, widespread media and legal attention has, over the last several decades, led to the spread of institution-based hugging restrictions because of what psychologists dub the “availability bias.” Decisionmakers can elevate, and likely exaggerate, the threat of pedophilia founded on hugs—and disregard the gains for children from innocent hugs.

The problem with restrictive hugging policies is that hugs can be good for children’s souls, minds, and behaviors, which can have subsequent beneficial economic consequences—literally. Claremont University neuroeconomist Paul Zak started his research career by drawing a tie between countries’ economic prosperity and how trusting their citizens are. The greater the

degree of trust among people within individual countries, the lower the costs of market transactions—and the greater their economic prosperity.

Over the past decade, Zak has turned to researching the neurobiological sources of trust and, hence, economic prosperity. Through many experiments, he has identified oxytocin, a brain-messaging chemical released in the so-called “pleasure center” of the brain, as crucial to the development of trust among people. Neuroscientists have long recognized that people release oxytocin by eating, having sex, giving birth, and nursing. Zak has made people more trusting (as measured by their performance

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in laboratory games) simply by squirting oxytocin up their noses, the most effective and least invasive way of getting the chemical to its intended target area of the brain.

Since nasal squirts of oxytocin can be mildly unpleasant to participants, Zak has sought ways of stimulating its release. He has found that physical contact in the form of simple massages—and, by extrapolation, hugs—can do the trick. As with the nasal spray, he has found that the release of oxytocin in the brain can cause people to become more caring, empathic, and even moral, as well as more trusting and trustworthy.

Zak’s research supports the work of child development experts who have long argued, under the banner of “attachment theory,” that human touch is extraordinarily important to the emotional and physical development of children. A study by Anthony Beech and Ian Mitchell describes how an insecure attachment style at an early age can negatively affect brain chemistry and function. (Oxytocin and vasopressin are crucial in forming a positive or secure attachment.) They note that a high percentage of sexual offenders report attachment deficit (the cause of which is somewhat unclear, but could result from a lack of appropriate human contact in their early years). That deficit appears to increase the likelihood that they will “seek out intimate attachments in ways where they will have sex with children.”

Tiffany Field at the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami has found that human touch also facilitates weight gain in preterm infants, reduces stress hormones, improves immune function, reduces pain, enhances attentiveness, and alleviates depressive symptoms. Children denied embraces, especially in their very early years and from their mothers, for long stretches of time, can suffer severe emotional problems later in life. Human touch, in the form of hugs, for example, can be therapeutic, “reducing tension in crisis.”

As this article was being readied for publication, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote on the burgeoning modern literature in economics, psychology, and neuroscience that he believes speaks to “the power of hugs” in shaping the life courses of young people. He described McGill University neurologist Michael Meaney’s work with laboratory rats. He observed that mother rats groomed and licked their babies with various levels of intensity. Through follow-up laboratory studies, Meaney found that the baby rats that were nurtured more grew up to be more social, curious, better able to negotiate mazes, and lived longer. He also found that the nurturing (grooming and licking) affected the babies’ brain structures in ways that made them better able at early ages to cope with stressors.

Other studies indicate these findings could be applicable to humans, as suggested by research findings already cited. Other research suggests that children who are nurtured

when young are better able to cope with life’s stressors, focus on and persists at tasks, and have a higher high school graduation rate and greater life success. Much of this literature is summarized in Paul Tough’s new book, *How Children Succeed*. Tough suggests these new lines of research indicate that what is needed most in so-called “bad schools” is not more drills to enhance cognitive skills, but more nurturing at home and in schools, especially for very young children. As Zak has found, these new lines of research also suggest there is an unheralded tie between, on the one hand, childhood nurturing and, on the other, economic prosperity at the individual and community levels, which can come through children’s enhanced emotional stability and educational achievement.

Risks of hugging and not hugging | Unfortunately, Zak’s and others’ research also suggests that hugs can be the favored initial assault weapons of pedophiles. Giving pedophiles a chance to hug children offers them a way of literally seducing children through the feelings of happiness and trust that can be traced to changes in the children’s brain chemistry. That, in turn, can make them open to sexual assault, and then to serial assault. Child sexual abuse victims may return time and again to their abusers partially because the initial assaults give the abusers protection from the threat of revelation, but also because the victims (knowingly or unknowingly) may seek to recapture the good feelings from the release of oxytocin.

However, the hugging research uncovers a public and institutional Gordian knot for policy. When and where hugs are restricted, or to the extent they are restricted, the emotional and behavioral development of children who are not hugged (or who are hugged less frequently and firmly) in appropriate ways can be impaired. The potential developmental problems of restrictive

hugging policies can be magnified when and where the care of children is progressively transferred from parents (where hugging can be free and open) to institutions such as daycare centers, schools, and after-school activity groups.

The emotional and behavioral development of disadvantaged children can be especially undermined because they are so often

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found in single-parent and low-income homes. There, hugs can be curbed simply by the absence of a second parent in the home and by the absence of care-hours from their single parents who must work. Poor children are also disproportionately represented in dysfunctional, and even violent, families (where parental monitoring of caregivers is tenuous at best) and in foster care, group homes, and juvenile detention centers (where restrictive hugging policies are likely to be found).

The Unintended Extended Harm of Hugging Restrictions

The heavy penalties already imposed on Penn State athletics and the yet-to-be-determined legal penalties from ongoing civil suits against the university and allegedly complicit administrators will, no doubt, reinforce institutions' efforts to ever-more-vigilantly guard themselves by making close contact between supervising adults and children less frequent. Limiting hugging to side-to-side, or banning hugging altogether, will likely continue to spread as the governing norm for close contact.

These policy shifts will likely be made in the absence of attention to the evidence of the beneficial effects of hugging, at least on balance. To our surprise on taking up this topic, we learned that no one has shown how effective (or ineffective) the restrictive hugging policies are in reducing the incidence and allegations of child molestations and assaults. How much damage restrictive hugging policies do to the emotional and physical development of children—the vast majority of whom will never be molested or assaulted—is simply unknown.

Granted, “side hugs” might provide some of the benefits of “frontal hugs.” But the comparative effects of frontal and side hugs on children’s brain chemistry, emotional states, and behaviors have not been studied. Zak argues that there are good reasons why “frontal hugs are very likely to be more powerful because of the more extensive body contact and face-to-face contact, which allows one to perceive smells better. There is a big mass of oxytocin receptors in the olfactory bulb.”

Moreover, it is doubtful that extended institutional hugging

regulations will have the intended effect of significantly reducing the frequency of child molestation (although the hugging restrictions might help institutions ward off false claims of child molestations). As noted, a substantial majority of child molesters are members of their victims’ families, outside the range of institutional hugging restrictions. Also, many pedophiles are skilled at what they do, always seeking to operate below the radar screens of monitors. As one child advocate noted, “The lowering of [children’s] sexual inhibitions is usually done so gradually and skillfully the victim does not realize he or she is a victim until it is too late. It may begin with simple affection such as a pat, hug, or kiss on the cheek.”

In addition, pedophiles can choose to hug their targets when others are not around, as Sandusky did most of the time. When restricted in hugging, they can also substitute a wide variety of initial overtures. For example, they can replace frontal hugs for their targeted victims with multiple side hugs or with extended hands on their victims’ shoulders or arms around their victims’ shoulders. They can make their initial contacts with added attention and extended discussions apart from other monitoring adults and children. As child advocacy groups have recognized, the range of initial overtures is immense.

Concluding Comments

The spate of recent, widely reported child molestation convictions should put people on alert for hidden cases of ongoing child molestation and assault. We also need to be mindful that decisions on restrictive care policies (with hugging being one of a number) can have inadvertent negative consequences for children. Obviously, research on the benefits and harms that flow from restrictive hugging policies is warranted, lest we impair the development of children—especially already disadvantaged children—with the best of protective policy intentions. The better road forward is for institutions to screen prospective staff members carefully and then monitor their contact with children. R

READINGS

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