

CHAPTER 2

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HUG, ROCK, AND LOVE YOUR CHILD

The idea that nurturing touch is essential for normal brain development seems obvious.

—Dougherty (2022)

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

I once heard a brain consultant by the name of Fritz Mengert say that if he had to choose between putting his grandchild in a daycare center where teachers rock, hold, and hug children and one where the academics are first and foremost, the decision would not be a difficult one. He would enroll his grandchild in the first one every time. After all, there are so many smart but mentally ill people in the world. The brain stands its best chance of growing normally if it is nurtured. Children tend to thrive in environments where there are various types of positive interactions. Of all the senses, touch is the first to develop in a human infant and remains the most *emotionally central* throughout life (Konnikova, 2015).

The inverse is also true. I used to wonder how some people could do such mean and devastating things to other human beings and appear to feel no remorse or empathy. I now know that one of the reasons may be that they were not shown much

empathy themselves. Some children who have never been rocked, held, touched in positive ways, and told that they matter can grow up without the empathy or sympathy that healthy brains develop. Since touch is a basic requirement for optimum health, both animal and human babies deprived of touch do not develop in normal ways (Weil, 2005). In fact, only one-fourth of children's brains are developed at birth. From birth on, every time a baby is fed, held, played with, talked to, sung to, or read to, the additional 75% develops. If you look at the personal history of many of the people who became serial killers, like Ted Bundy or Richard Ramirez, you will find that one of the correlates is often that they were verbally and/or physically abused in the early years of their upbringing when their ability to empathize was being developed.



Empathy, or concern for others, may be hardwired in a baby's brain since it is one of the earliest emotions they display (Wingert & Brant, 2005).

Let's consider this analogy: What happens to pit bulls and other types of dogs that are groomed for dogfighting rings? They are both verbally and physically abused by people they trust. It makes the dogs so angry that they will often fight to the death. What makes us think the situation is any different for a human being? So many children are coming to school angry and oppositional, and some of these feelings may result from the lack of nurturing in the home.

Here is a personal true story. Our two daughters are our biological children. Our son, Christopher, is adopted. For almost the first year of his life, Chris was in a foster home with an elderly foster mother who fed and changed him and did little else. He was seldom talked to, read to, held, hugged, or rocked. When we adopted him, we discovered some deficits in his readiness for learning, for which we have attempted to compensate. His language skills were a bit delayed, his adenoids were blocking 20% of his hearing, and as he grew up, he began to show symptoms of attention deficit disorder. While it is unclear whether these symptoms would have been present even if his initial environment had been a nurturing one, the

great news is that we were able to make up a great deal of those deficits by surrounding him with lots of love, a multitude of hugs, plenty of talks, and constant attention. Soothing babies when they are distressed prepares them as they grow and mature to regulate themselves and identify how to calm themselves down when they are upset (CEDARS, 2021).

You have probably heard about the studies of babies born in orphanages who are fed and have their diapers changed but are not touched, rocked, or held. The studies show that these babies do not seem to thrive as do those who receive personal attention.



Since touch activates numerous areas in the brain, premature babies who were not touched and held did not develop as rapidly as those who were (Rodriguez, 2007).

If you don't commit to any other action plan in this book, please commit to continue to rock, hold, hug, and love your child. Human touch encourages healthy brain development. Nurturing touch also promotes children's physiological systems, which regulate emotions and responses to stress (CEDARS, 2021). However, it doesn't matter how much children are loved by other caregivers; children need to know that they are loved by their parents first and foremost (Fox, 2001).

HOW CAN I MAKE IT HAPPEN?

- Take time to hug, rock, hold, and love your newborn. Continue this practice throughout your baby's early life. Not only will it provide a sense of security for your child, but it can also lead to healthy brain development. In addition, babies who are not able to meet specific *emotional milestones* due to a lack of touch could have difficulty learning to speak, read, and be successful later in school (Wingert & Brant, 2005, p. 35).
- As children grow older, they do not lose their desire for positive interactions. However, those interactions may

need to take another form. Give your older child high fives, pats on the back, and other gestures of endearment. It will make a difference in your relationship with them.

- Create a signal that only you and your child know that symbolizes your love and affection for one another. Use it at certain times throughout the day, such as when you are dropping your child off at school or taking them to a sporting event. For example, there used to be a television variety show called *The Carol Burnett Show*. Every time the show ended, Carol Burnett, its star, would pull her ear as she said goodnight. This was her way of telling her grandmother, who was always watching the show, that she loved her.
- According to mental health professionals, people need about 12 positive interactions each day to thrive, 8 positive interactions to maintain their current state, and 4 positive interactions simply to survive. Positive interactions include smiles, hugs, handshakes, high fives, “I love you,” and other affirming comments. Think of all the children who do not get a single positive interaction before they go to school. No one says “Good morning!” or “Have a great day!” Then they go to school, where they may get no positive interactions, and then return home, where these interactions are still not forthcoming. No wonder the incidence of depression among children is increasing!
- When you are angry with your child, this is the worst possible time to discipline them. Increased anger is a threat to the brain. When the brain is threatened, it goes into survival mode and the blood moves downward from the parts of the brain where higher-level thinking takes place. People are unable to make rational decisions at this time, and they will do or say things that they would never do or say if the brain were not in this state. Refer to Chapter 10 for additional information on responding negatively to inappropriate behavior.
- The next time you get angry with your child, remember Habit 1 of *The 7 Habits Of Highly Effective People*: “Be proactive, not reactive” (Covey, 2020). When a child

misbehaves, proactive parents push the pause button and put some space between the misbehavior and their response. In this space, they decide how they will deal with the misbehavior based on their principles. Reactive parents respond immediately, and for the reasons we just discussed, that response is not usually the best one.

- Refrain from using any forms of negative touch, such as pulling your child by their clothes or arms, shoving them, grabbing them, or spanking them. These negative interactions, if used excessively, can destroy parent–child relationships and create an angry child who may even seek revenge for the actions of their parents.
- When you are tempted to lose control of a situation with your child, remember this: *He who angers you controls you*. I have even seen children who purposefully did or said things in an effort to anger their parents. Remain calm! Don't let them push your buttons. Push the pause button instead! A teacher told me once, "They can't drive you crazy if you don't give them the keys!"

ACTION PLAN FOR HUGGING, ROCKING, AND LOVING MY CHILD

What will I commit to do to ensure that my child is hugged, rocked, and loved?		
RECOMMENDATIONS	CURRENTLY DOING	PLAN TO DO
Hug, rock, hold, and love my baby.		
Give older children various types of positive interactions (e.g., high fives, handshakes, pats on the back).		
Create an original symbol to show my love and affection.		
Provide 12 positive interactions per day so my child thrives.		
Be careful about disciplining my child when angry.		
When angry, push the pause button before responding.		
Refrain from any forms of negative touch.		
Don't be tempted to lose control of a situation with my child.		
Goals and notes:		