

The Fear of Touching

By Mark Koss-Fillinger, Monte Vista

“ ‘As teachers, we love children, and we have an instinct to be close to children, to give them a hug and show them we care,’ said (John) Wright, vice president of the Arizona Education Association. ‘But you simply can’t do that if you’re a man. . . . One misperception can ruin your career.’ ”

This quotation from an article by Cece Todd appeared in the February 9 edition of the East Valley Tribune. With the rash of teacher abuse cases over the last few months, indeed years, it is a reaction that certainly bears merit. The article goes on to quote several male teachers, primarily in the Chandler District. One of them, Ken Zarnick, is actually a former colleague of mine here at Monte Vista. The majority of those quoted, including Ken, were in agreement with Wright; they simply don’t touch children.

There is a lot to consider in regard to this issue. Among the concerns is the double standard to which male and female teachers are held in our society. This double standard goes right up to and includes our justice system. Several years ago a male teacher here in the valley was sexually involved with a female middle school student in what became a very high profile case; eventually, he was given a mandatory twelve-year sentence in prison. At about the same time, a female high school teacher, again here in the valley, was sexually involved with a male student; her punishment was the loss of her teaching certificate. Indeed, if we only looked at this example, a double standard is more than obvious. Certainly, though, in our culture a female teacher, especially at an elementary level, who embraces a student is seen as nurturing, while a male teacher in the same circumstances can certainly be seen as bordering on the improper, if not on molestation.

All teachers, however, need to be aware of what is appropriate and what is not. Patty Rogers, a third grade teacher in Gilbert, stated in Todd’s article that, “as a teacher, no matter what sex you are, you have to be careful. You don’t put yourself in a situation that can be misinterpreted.” Of course, it is only logical that we avoid isolating ourselves with individual students. The door should be open when we are working one-on-one with a student. It is most likely inappropriate in just about any circumstance to give kids frontal hugs, and certainly any form of touching must be appropriate. But these are the same considerations we give to adults. There are certain behaviors that are simply unacceptable, definitely socially, and of course legally. As a

male educator, surrounded by female colleagues, these social mores are always a factor in the ways I interact with them and they with me. There are simply certain expectations that we have of our colleagues in regard to our behavior with each other, and if we cross those social barriers, we can expect that a colleague will be offended, and might even take legal action. Even among adults, as Wright says, “one misperception can ruin your career.”

All in all, though, I have to respectfully disagree with John Wright and with Ken. I think it is appropriate to touch children, and that to avoid touching our students is simply wrong. One reason for this is a personal one, but certainly one that is of the utmost importance to me. I do not like the idea of living in fear. To assume that something bad is going to happen to you, male or female, because you were kind to a child, is utter foolishness. It is foolish, in part, because you then begin to imagine scenarios that most likely will never come true, and you waste energy and anxiety on something that is primarily only in your imagination. You may as well start running scared because a meteorite might hit you some day. The probability of a teacher losing his or her career because of an appropriate physical interaction with a child may be higher than that of getting hit by some object crashing down from the sky, but it’s still so small that it bears no real consideration. In the vast majority of cases where teachers have lost their positions, or have even gone to prison, they were guilty and deserved their fates. Teachers who are respectful of their students, who touch appropriately, should have nothing to fear. If you are fearful, it is my opinion that your fear is misplaced, that it is born of rumor, exaggeration and media frenzy.

More importantly, however, is the value of the relationships we form with our students during the nine months we spend with them. It is so important that we consider our philosophy of teaching in regard to these relationships. I have thought for a long time now that the core of our relationships with our students, our children, should be anchored in concepts of love, love of teaching, love of learning, and certainly love of children. There are then many ramifications of that philosophy, which don’t necessarily belong in this discussion, but one that does belong is how we will relate to these children. What is ideal, in my opinion, is that we build an atmosphere for our students where they are safe, comfortable, where they have a sense of security, and where there is no anxiety or fear on their part. That is a direct result of what an individual

teacher does to build that atmosphere. So as we go about building these relationships with the students, our interaction with each individual is so very important. How can a hand on a child's shoulder, or the ruffling of a child's hair, be precluded from your relationship with that child? Hugs should unquestionably be part of a teacher's repertoire in working with children

Imagine how the children might feel if you do all that you can to convince them that you care about them, that you are interested in their success, that they are so very important to you. Imagine how hard you work to develop an atmosphere in a classroom that reflects your love and concern for the children and for your work with them. Then imagine how a child might feel if you've done all that, tried so hard so much to show your care for that child, but in the final analysis, you won't even let that child touch you. The most elementary form of human interaction is off limits to both you and the child! Considering the issue in these terms, I think it borders on the unethical to preclude touching from your interaction with children. I agree with Chandler principal Rich Doyle, who said "that despite the precautions educators must take, he hopes public education never reaches the point where a student hugs a teacher...and the teacher pushes the child away."

Going a step further, it is in fact my thought that teachers should indeed serve as excellent examples of appropriate touching. Because in our society children face so many family difficulties, teachers are indeed role models for children, and in many cases are the only ones. Needless to say this is an area where we can do so much good for kids. They need the closeness of the relationships we can provide; some of them need us a lot. We, especially at the elementary level, often become one of the most important individuals in a child's life. It becomes an opportunity for us to show a child how he or she should be treated, and it is for many children, an opportunity that should not be avoided. It can be thought of, in that light, as a responsibility that we absolutely must accept.

As a fourth grade teacher, I realize that my view of this whole issue must be considered in light of the age group with which I work. There are certainly different circumstances in middle schools, even in fifth grade, but again, it is a matter of behaving in an appropriate fashion, regardless of the age of the children with whom we work. If we treat our students with the same courtesy and respect we are obligated to give each other as adults we are on safe ground. If we treat our children with kindness, care and compassion, and with courtesy and respect, then our pats on the back, our tousling of a child's hair, even our hugs are not only acceptable, but necessary to our success as teachers.

Here's an irony. The day before the aforementioned article came out, another headline caught my eye. It was a story about how children are more and more, in our culture, being raised with too much television and too many video games, and are being deprived of relationships with people, particularly with their own parents and relatives. While the majority of the article focused on the need to continue to work with the very young in the face of budget cutbacks of government programs, one section was of importance to this discussion. More and more children are entering our school emotionally ill prepared to learn, coming from environments where there is a paucity of affection, both emotional and physical. "They are not ready for letters and numbers...because they are still struggling emotionally and socially," the article stated. "That struggle...is the result of our lack of relationships." The title of this article? "Too much TV," and, you knew this was coming, "too few hugs."

The article also gave us a quote by psychiatrist Bruce Perry. "We have to make sure that young children get what they need when they need it." They need a lot, and those needs only increase as they age, but certainly what they often need is attention from us as teachers. They need a pat on the head, a hand on the shoulder, a whispered word of encouragement, or just to hold the teacher's hand, and very often, they need a hug.