A **warm, secure hug** given during a moment of emotional chaos works to **restore the chemical balance** in a child's brain; physical contact from an adult's mature body helps calm the immature one.

The Power of Touch

How physical affection helps with discipline

BY KELLY BARTLETT

A group of 15 moms and dads were gathering for their weekly parenting class, when one mother shares a moment from the previous week. "My daughter had a fit the other day when I told her it was time to get in the car." Every head in the room nods in recognition and understanding. Another dad commiserates, "My son once threw Legos at the TV because I said he couldn't watch TV!" These types of exchanges are shared by the most well-meaning parents; despite even the most positive parenting efforts, kids get mad! Their immature brains do not have the capability to remain calm while working through challenging feelings.

Author of the *Positive Discipline* series, Dr. Jane Nelsen educates parents on non-punitive discipline strategies, many of which are centered on the use of touch. Physical affection is as equally important to older children as it is to infants, and it has an effect on brain chemistry that is conducive to positive behavior. As Dr. Nelsen says, "Children do better when they feel better."

BRING BACK THE BEANBAG
'Deep pressure' providing items like beanbag chairs may help children receive the sensory input they crave.

Be proactive Parents don't need to wait for children to come to them for touches, hugs, whole-body-scoops and kisses. Being regularly physically affectionate with kids of all ages actually helps maintain the emotional connection they share with their parents. When that bond remains strong, challenging behavioral situations decrease and discipline becomes less intense overall.

Cuddle As children grow and become more independent and social, opportunities for cuddling naturally diminish, and it becomes important for parents to take extra effort to find ways to physically connect with them. Reading to a child or even watching a movie on the couch is a wonderful way to get close, as it invites leaning into, lying on, snuggling, touching, and arm-wrapping.

Play Person-to-person contact games naturally inhibit children's impulsiveness; kids are able to sit still longer and have an increase in focused attention. Games such as horsey rides, piggy back rides, wrestling, tag, or even Red Rover involve person-to-person contact, and they all promote the release of positive brain chemicals and bring families closer together in a fun, physical way.

Touch base "Touching base" begins quite naturally when children are very young; they will instinctively take time to explore the world away from mom and dad, and then continually come back to the safety of a parent's arms to physically reconnect. It is important to note that older children need this as well – time on their own to play and be independent, then a physical reconnection with mom or dad. It could mean lying on a lap, having their hair stroked, getting a foot rub or shoulder massage, or just snuggling while reading together.

Using touch as a reactive strategy As helpful as positive discipline is as a proactive measure, it is quite often needed as a reactive approach to discipline as well. Touching calms and reinforces the emotional bond between parents and children. When children touch a calm parent in a loving way, the chemical balance within their brains begins to be reinstated.

Hug Giving a child a hug when they're having an all-out screaming fit may not be the first thing that comes to a parent's mind. Probably, more likely is the temptation to scream right along with them! But a warm, secure hug given during a moment of emotional chaos works to restore the chemical balance in a child's brain; physical contact from an adult's mature body helps calm the immature one.

"Children **do** better when they **feel** better."

Connected conversations Going one step beyond verbal connection is adding the element of touch. Parents can make their words even more effective when they add an element of touch, such as taking a child's hands in theirs or placing a gentle hand on a child's shoulder. It nonverbally tells that child, "I'm here for you."

Quiet the senses Some children may become overly-stimulated by being touched too much or too irritatingly. For these children, it helps to have a quiet place to go to play or work without the risk of uninvited touching from overly-physical siblings or exuberant pets.

Deep pressure For some kids, deep pressure is a welcome sensation and helps to relax an overly excited mind. Ball pits, deep tissue massages, oversized bean bag chairs, or weighted blankets or vests may help children receive the sensory input they crave, and help their minds and bodies communicate more effectively.

So if a child hurls Legos at the TV or throws a fit when it's time to get in the car, it's nothing personal! It's all about brain chemistry and emotional connection, and sometimes the very best thing a parent can do is offer a soothing, calming, connecting touch.

Kelly is a Certified Positive Discipline Educator and mother of two. **CCM**

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