

The power of touch

On 2nd January 1998 my new nephew made a surprise entrance to the world. Born at 26 weeks and weighing just under 2lbs, his little life hung in the balance for a number of weeks. Thanks to the dedicated care of medical staff he is now a strapping teenager, and few would know his life had such a precarious start.

One of the things that made a difference to his early development was 'kangaroo care'. His mother would sit for hours holding him to her chest – skin to skin. Research has shown that touch given in this way has significant benefits for premature babies' development, enabling them to feed better and to be discharged from hospital earlier.

This is perhaps not surprising: our skin is both our largest sensory organ and the first sensory organ to develop in the womb. When we are lovingly touched by someone, our body will produce the hormone oxytocin – a hormone that make us feel good – and at the same time it will reduce the stress hormone cortisol.

We can lay a

firm foundation for a baby's future health development by building their first emotional bonds through touch.

When our children are young we may find it relatively easy to give them affectionate touch. Getting them dressed and undressed, bath time, story time, watching television together on the sofa are all great opportunities for hugs, kisses, pats and cuddles. Opportunities like these may be less the older children grow, but the need is no less great. As they venture into activities of their own, to playgroup or to school, the world can feel a daunting place. A simple hug when they leave and return can give them reassurance that home is their centre of gravity where they are loved and accepted.

Both boys and girls need appropriate demonstrations of physical affection.

Whilst most girls enjoy a gentle hug or cuddle, boys often enjoy more vigorous contact. High fives, wrestling or rough and tumble games all give the opportunity to connect in a meaningful way.

As parents, if we have grown up in homes where there was little physical affection, it may initially feel awkward

to demonstrate our love to our children in this way. But even if it is not our natural instinct to do so, it is worth persevering with, starting as we feel able. We don't need an excuse or a special occasion to give our children a hug. Whilst a cuddle or a kiss gives comfort to a child who is hurt or upset, there are also opportunities to connect as part and parcel of the ups and downs of ordinary everyday family life.

Making time for meaningful touch is not always easy. As parents and carers many of us live in the fast lane, juggling multiple demands on our time. Let's not allow the busyness of family life to prevent us from pausing to make time for that hug or kiss or 'high five'. Although it takes only a moment, it communicates loudly and clearly to our children a message that is vital to their well-being – the message that they are loved.

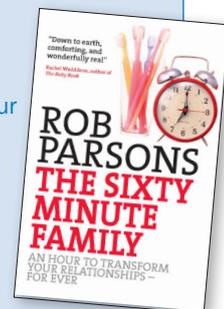
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