



feature story



“Why don’t you give us hugs?”

A casual classroom conversation caused a male kindergarten teacher to consider his interactions with students.

BY MATTHEW LUGINBILL, PH.D.

During the last day of my third grade student teaching experience, a young girl named Sarah silently approached me from behind, unnoticed, and gave me a hug. She wrapped her arms around the back of my leg, closed her eyes, and rested the side of her head on my khaki pants. Her grip on my leg offered an uncomfortable moment for me, and I was left with a situation where I did not know how to react. It seemed to last for hours. I quickly looked at my cooperating teacher, not only for help, but to see her reaction. Her attention was focused in another direction. I looked back down at the young girl and patted her head like I would pat a dog. This brief encounter passed unnoticed by the class. This kind and loving goodbye gesture left me conflicted.

Being a male teacher, I was uncomfortable with the touching nature of giving a hug to a young girl and the perceptions that go along with it, but part of me enjoyed the nurturing thank you Sarah had offered on my last day in her classroom.

My teacher education program did a wonderful job of preparing me for the curriculum aspects of teaching such as creating lesson plans, differentiating instruction, writing assessments, and providing intervention. I was not prepared for the gendered environment of early childhood education when Sarah hugged me. The topic of physical contact was not addressed in my preparation program, and during my field experiences I often kept my distance from touching students. I would give both boys and girls high fives or fist bumps on the playground or in the classroom for positive reinforcement. When students would approach me for a hug I would back away or stop their progress with a hand to the head, because I was not comfortable with this aspect of my role. These field experiences were the first opportunities in which I was interacting with young children, and I was more comfortable establishing physical boundaries between us.

By the time I started my teaching career, I had developed a hands-off approach to physical contact with students. My peers in the building warned me about touching students, and my mom, who was a

kindergarten teacher at the time, said, “You should never be alone in the classroom with a student.” After only two short years in third grade, I moved down to first grade and finally settled in kindergarten. The combination of sustained experience and teaching in younger grades began to erode the boundaries I had established. My hands-off stance regarding physical contact with students, however, would soon meet its match.

Kindergarten students are wired to be inquisitive. They are constantly asking questions about every topic under the sun. By spring they sometimes begin to show interest in the personal aspects of my life. Before this time, some of them think I live and sleep at the school. I became the topic of interest one spring afternoon. Kindergarteners can be remarkably blunt and honest. One girl raised her hand and asked, “Are you married?” I quickly replied, “No.” She asked, “Why not?” I replied, “I haven’t found the right person yet.” I called on another student who asked, “Do you have any kids?” I responded, “Sure, all twenty-two kids in our room!” The class smiled and the girl followed up with, “You

know what I mean, do you have any kids?" I said, "No." Our discussion continued and I answered both the initial and follow up questions from the class. As quickly as the spontaneous interview started it was beginning to fizzle out when one young lady asked a seemingly harmless question, "Why don't you give us hugs?" This thoughtful question left me speechless. I was at a loss for words. When I find myself in situations like this, I try to buy time and said, "Great question." I thought about her question for a few more seconds and eventually responded, "I really don't know." Not knowing it at the time, this moment created the momentum for improving my relationships of care with the students in kindergarten.

After school, I began to reflect on why I never gave hugs to students. I had over eight years teaching experience. I was comfortable with my own masculinity and my nurturing role as a kindergarten teacher. At the time I was not ready to completely abandon my policy regarding physical contact with students, but this discussion really shook my philosophy. A few days later, as a result of

our discussion, I said to the class, "On the last day of school you can have a choice: a handshake, a high-five, or a hug." When I made this announcement I looked over at the young girl who had prompted me to reflect on my policy, and a smile crept across her face. She was glowing and seemingly had already made her decision.

Now, with seventeen years in early childhood education, I check all of the boxes to make parents feel comfortable about their children spending the day with a male teacher: I am married to a woman, I am a dad with two of my own daughters at home, and I have built up a reputation over the past fourteen years in my current district. Unfortunately, not all men who enter early childhood education have the time and support to navigate these gender stereotypes. Surprisingly, a few years ago one of my administrators actually addressed the topic of physical contact with students at the opening of the school year. He gave teachers the green light to hug and squeeze students, because they need to feel safe, secure, and loved in our district. Hearing this put me even more at ease about

giving daily hugs to the children in my class.

When school begins every year, school personnel have lofty goals of developing students into problem solvers, risk-takers, critical thinkers, creative students, and good citizens. This broad focus seems to narrow after initial getting-to-know-you activities, and our spotlight shifts to speaking, writing, reading, and work with numbers. Whether you welcome your students to a new school year with a smile, high-five, or hug, showing them you care is a necessary first step in building relationships and helping them become passionate, life-long learners.

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