

Touch and SalsAmigos Dancing

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SalsAmigos dancing is a form of a Latin American dance called *rueda de casino*. The dancers move from partner to partner. Touching one another is fundamental to the dancing. It is impossible to do this dance without dancers touching one another. Most of this dance involves hand to hand and hand on shoulder blade touching.

Some elements of the dance include dancers moving with their bodies very close to one another. As one student put it, "In this dance there is no personal space."

SalsAmigos dancing includes extensive healthy and appropriate touching among students and among students and teachers that arguably makes important contributions to personal and intellectual teen development.

It is a tragedy of today's schools that few young people are safe from inappropriate touch behaviors such as sexual harassment, bullying, physical misconduct, and physical violence not only among student peers, but also between students and teachers. "Touch" and "touching" have become the subjects of extensive concern and often prohibition.¹ Misconduct involving contact is extensive and serious. It is essential that schools protect students and provide faculty and staff with clear boundaries for appropriate behavior. Such concerns are not to be challenged.

The very word "touch" has begun to take on the character and association of inappropriateness. "He touched me!" is a statement that, when uttered in an educational environment, usually denotes inappropriate or harassing physical contact. The examples of behavior associated with the word "touch" that come to administrative, parental, and public attention have demanded that school officials prohibit all touch, preferring to err, if necessary, on the side of safety and protection of our youth.

Yet, touch is essential to human growth and development. This is well established. The pressing issue is how to provide healthy and appropriate touching among students and between students and teachers that will grant all students this ray of sunshine so they may bask in its healthiness and benefit from its energy.

In this presentation the importance of appropriate "touch" and "touching" is explored along with a discussion of how SalsAmigos dancing embodies healthy touching and thereby contributes in positive ways to human development. Such touching must be incorporated in school curricula to assure the healthy personal and academic development of our youth.

Touch is commonly relegated to the "lower" or "animal" senses. Schools focus almost exclusively on the supposed "higher" senses seeing and hearing. Touch is completely ignored except when seen as a

¹ See Heather Piper and Ian Stronach, *Don't Touch! The educational story of a panic* (London: Routledge: 2008).

problem. When we appreciate how remarkable touch is, can we continue to prohibit it? Why is touch so essential to human development and health?

Touch is, in evolutionary terms, the first sense to come into being and touch is developed even in the simplest single cell creatures such as the amoeba. All other senses can, in a way, be understood as specialized touch sensations. For example, hearing involves the touch of compressed air on the ear drum and smell involves the physical contact of chemicals on the nasal membrane and taste buds.

The skin, the organ of touch, is the largest and most spatially expansive human organ. The skin can be thought of as the most extended surface of the brain; in turn, the brain the deepest layer of the skin. The skin is the container for the body; the boundary between inside and outside; the boundary between self and world, self and other. Pediatrician Dr. Henry Dwight Chapin, in an early twentieth century study, found that infants deprived of touch experienced a mortality rate of 90%. A *New York Times* article in 1988 reported “psychological and physical stunting of infants deprived of physical contact, although otherwise fed and cared for.”²

It is well documented that touched newborn preemie babies gain weight as much as 50% faster than unmassaged babies. Massaged infants are more active and responsive and more aware of their surroundings. Many studies of the importance of touch have been done by Dr. Tiffany Field of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine.³ Saul Schanberg of the department of pharmacology at Duke University spoke of touch in 1989 “We forget that touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it.” Dr. Constance Classen in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal wrote, touch “is a fundamental human medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies.” Significantly the word “touch” is the longest single entry in the unabridged dictionaries of many languages. The “touch” entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* runs fourteen full columns.

Touch is also the interface between our physical existence and our thought and emotional processes. It bridges between our visible physical being and the invisibility of our thoughts and feelings. We say we are “touched” by something when we feel deeply about it. Touch gives experiential shape to the world around us. Without touch we “feel” the true isolation that is at the heart of the enigma of the human condition. Without touch we are separated, isolated, and profoundly alone.

Appreciating that touch is fundamental to the sense of self and to the connection to the world and to others, we can understand how deeply impactful then is inappropriate touching, physical and sexual violence, and bullying. Such behavior is not mere annoyance; it is deeply affective to one’s sense of self, to confidence, to sense of identity, to the full range of social behavior, to emotional stability. The affects of inappropriate touching are often devastating.

Yet, for the very same reasons, a developing life without healthy appropriate touching is like a flower without water. It starves as certainly as does a body deprived of food. And sadly touch starvation is

² See Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 73 for other examples.

³ Tiffany Field, *Touch* (The MIT Press, 2001)

rarely as obvious as is physical starvation. We crave touch as surely as we crave food and sunshine. Touching is our most fundamental contact with the world.

But why is this so? How can we understand? Let us consider touch more deeply. Scientists and philosophers who study human perception note that the paradigm we use when we think about perception is usually vision, not touch, and we think of vision on a photographic model. That is, we think of vision, and by extension, all human perception, imagining our bodies as cameras passively recording images. In this commonly held view perception is a one-way process in which the brain, using information from the sense organs, constructs a more or less objective internal representation of the world. Seeing is believing and eye witness is truth. This view of perception is no longer supported.

Remarkably as early as 1709, Irish philosopher George Berkeley had come to understand that touch is the only genuine spatial sense. He argued that touch is intrinsically active; that it is only through physical movement that we directly encounter space. Recent scholarship has confirmed Berkeley's idea. Perception is now understood as an interactive process based on movement. When we touch something to experience its texture or "feel," we invariably move our finger over a surface. What Berkeley and contemporary scientists of perception have found is that touch acquires content through movement. Touch is intrinsically active and, thus, best serves as the most appropriate model for all perception.⁴

With touch as the model for interactive perception, scholars understand vision, like touch, to be based on movement. It is only as we move, even the slightest amount, that we gain the experience of depth and shape. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French existential phenomenologist and brilliant modern theorist of perception, found that "depth" is not directly perceived as some measure of a fixed ground that separates us from objects in the world. Rather we perceive relative depth through vision only when there is an object partially occluding, that is hiding, another object. Importantly movement is necessary. Only when an object moves between us and another object, caused either by the movement of the occluding object or by our own movement do we perceive depth. This movement may be the small movement of our head or eyes or even by the effect of movement between the perspective of our two eyes.

Recent studies show that the development of normal vision depends on the movement of the body relative to the environment, but, importantly, this movement must be self-actuated. This means that only through self-movement can one test and thus learn the relevant patterns of sensorimotor dependence. This means that developing the sense of feeling and knowing where our bodies are in space—that is, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive awareness—is inseparable from the development of normal vision. How remarkable this is! We cannot develop normal vision without self-movement, without an internal touch sense of our moving bodies.⁵

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's lifelong study of touch, its implications for human perception, and, indeed, for all reality, culminated in what he understood to be "the ultimate truth." He understood that we are

⁴ Noë, *Action in Perception*, pp. 96-100

⁵ Noë, *Action in Perception*, pp. 13

interconnected with everything we perceive in the same way that our one hand is connected with our other when touching it. Touching and being touched are two sides of the same thing. He extended this relationship to the world holding that seeing and being seen are two sides of the same thing. All perception is interactive requiring the presence of perceivables in the world that are perceived by the active perceiver. All perception is in a sense then touch. Touch and movement are also the basis for feeling and emotion. We say that something touches us or that we are moved by it when we feel deeply about it.

Touch is then at the root of the human sense experience of movement, interaction, playfulness, give and take, aliveness, emotion, and feeling. It is through touch, and the necessary accompaniment of movement, that we come to have a sense of self, that we perceive the world beyond ourselves, and, most remarkably, interconnect ourselves with the world around us. Touch is depth; touch is emotion. Touch is at once the most physical and grossly fleshy of human perceptual experiences and also perhaps the most philosophically and abstractly profound and sophisticated of our senses. As Helen Keller so remarkably demonstrated, life without seeing or hearing, while impaired, can still be full and rich, but only because of the remarkable powers of touch. As she noted, life without touch is simply not possible. No wonder touch deprived infants simply die and massaged preemies seem so eager to get going in the world.

Given this enriched understanding of touch and touching, schools that prohibit all touch, schools that have not found ways to provide young developing people with healthy and appropriate touch experiences, may be depriving students of an essential ingredient to their full and healthy development. Surprisingly, even without explicit prohibition of touching and movement, our educational furniture is designed to separate and immobilize learning bodies. This furniture supports the common practice of restricting movement, the companion of touch, in service to learning. Can we have gotten this wrong? Might we begin to understand that problems that manifest in physical abuse, sexual harassment, and bullying may not arise because we have not adequately restricted touching, but rather, shockingly, that these problems are the result of young developing people being deprived of healthy and appropriate touch? Dr. James Prescott, a developmental neurophysiologist at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development says as much. He wrote, "I believe that the deprivation of body touch, contact, and movement are the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances which include depressive and autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence, and aggression."

This bears repeating, "I believe" wrote Dr. Prescott, "that the deprivation of body touch, contact, and movement are the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances which include depressive and autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence, and aggression."

If this is the case, then to progressively restrict touch and touching contributes to, rather than resolves, the problems it addresses. Even our seemingly innocuous functional educational furniture may play a negative role. The challenge is to introduce forms of appropriate and healthy touching. To accomplish this is arguably as important and likely more fundamental than any other learning experience.

SalsAmigos dancing involves constant and extensive touching. Look at how the students first touch one another. Students face one another in pairs arranged in a circle and those who have their left hands on the outside of the circle are asked to hold up their hands. Then their partners join these upraised hands by placing their palms around the thumbs, and the first hand closes. This hand holding position is strictly functional to the dance. Notably this hold position has little association with intimacy, as might entwined fingers or even hand holding palm to palm. All students learn and dance in both positions which are later termed “lead” and “follow.” There is no regard whatsoever for gender or any identity of role with gender. Boys dance with boys; girls with girls; as well as mixed genders. The dance involves constant changing of partners.

Early in the first class to get dancers to begin circulating from partner to partner we teach a move called “*dile que no.*” This move requires a different kind of touch. The dancer on the left is the “lead” and he or she places the right hand on the shoulder blade of the “follow” to her or his right. They may also hold hands, with the lead’s left to the follow’s right. This position involves extensive touching and then as the follow walks across in front of the lead the dancers’ bodies are momentarily quite close to one another.

Combining the basic rhythm pattern, which is called *guapea*, with the *dile que no* creates a move called *dame* that results in one dancer in each couple, that is, all the leads, moving to the next follow along the circle in a counterclockwise direction. Focus on the touching elements as dancers do *dame* moves.

In another common series of moves that is usually taught the very first day of class, the dancers become quite entwined. Notice that dancers’ bodies come very close to one another. The element of the move that entwines the dancers can be called repeatedly, each time drawing the dancers closer and closer to one another. When I call the circle I attempt to stop when the dancers are close to one another, yet not jam-packed together. However, later when students begin to call the circle, I have noticed that they like to repeat this element to the point of the students being mashed together. They seem to love this moment.

To look at one other move is useful. This move is called *adios* and requires that students briefly come to a position side by side, right hip to right hip, with the lead’s right hand across the front of her or his partner with their hand on their partner’s hip. This move perhaps has the most extensive touching.

Now let’s review and reflect on the kind of touching that takes place in SalsAmigos dancing.

- Touching is always a function of the dance. It is simply necessary to do the dance.
- Touching is restricted to hand to hand contact and hand to shoulder blade contact where the contact is functional and not suggestive of intimacy.
- Touching is always brief.
- Touching is done openly and overtly.
- Touching is done by all participants equally and at the same time without regard to gender or status—student or teacher.
- Touching, in contrast with most sport contact, is cooperative rather than combative.

The pedagogical philosophy related to the touch element of SalsAmigos dancing is, I believe, essential to assuring that touching is healthy and appropriate.

- We never use the words “touch” or “touching.” These are loaded words and their use would draw unnecessary attention to the potential for inappropriateness. We never have a talk at the beginning of the course to present rules or warnings about inappropriate touchING or about comfort levels or about anything related to touching. The principle here is quite simple really. When the expectations are that everything that takes place is open, done by everyone, totally appropriate, and healthy, that is what it turns out to be.
- Rather we use language like, “If your left hand is on the outside of the circle, hold it up. Now if your right hand is on the outside of the circle, grab the thumb of the person in front of you. Now those with the left hand involved close your fingers around your partner’s hand.” This is simple functional language.
- SalsAmigos teaching is always done at a pace gauged to keep the students constantly moving and learning at the most rapid rate that positively challenges them. This is an essential aspect of SalsAmigos pedagogy and constitutes the art of SalsAmigos teaching. Students cannot be pushed beyond a level where the challenge is too great. This produces so much frustration that students simply disengage. Yet they must be kept constantly learning with the highest demands they can enjoy. There are never moments when we allow students to break out of the circle or the group to sit down or where we take a student aside for individual instruction. The completeness and integrity of the circle which requires that all students act together at a challenging rate are essential. In this environment, students experience such mind/body demands that there is no time or energy to think of much beyond keeping up.

My experience teaching hundreds of teens provides some insights: CLICK

- Certainly some teens are more comfortable touching others and being touched. Some touch in the most tentative way possible. On a move such as *adios*, some students leave their arm hang rather than place it across their partner’s body. I have also had students from cultures where touching another is highly charged. The few students I have worked with who bring this valuation of touch to class have adjusted well, yet I have seen that they experienced some discomfort. It is certainly possible that youth from some cultures might find the physical contact in SalsAmigos dancing impossible.
- Few young people have shown any concern whatsoever about making physical contact with others of the same gender. One group I taught had 10 boys and 2 girls. One of the boys had Middle Eastern heritage and both girls were Latina. I did not find any reticence among any of these students although the Middle Eastern boy adjusted his contact with others to the minimal possible. This group performed for the whole high school at the end of the term and no student indicated any concern for the gendered mix and the entire school strongly supported their performance.
- I have never had a single instance of a student complaining about inappropriate touching, although on several occasions I have had students ask if I would talk to the whole class about personal hygiene. I do not do this. Students commonly talk, usually in a humorous vein, about

the unpleasantness of touching sweating and sometimes odorous peers. There seems to be a clear understanding among most that this is simply one of the dimensions of SalsAmigos dancing.

I believe that now more than ever before our youth need as much healthy and appropriate and safe touching as possible. While the limitation of touch in educational settings is perhaps necessary for the protection of our youth, such restrictions must be complemented by activities where teenagers experience healthy touching. Remember what is at stake, as stated by Dr. James Prescott who wrote, "I believe that the deprivation of body touch, contact, and movement are the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances which include depressive and autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence, and aggression." SalsAmigos dancing provides teenagers with extensive healthy and appropriate touch.