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ARTICLE

Hugs connect us. Hugs can heal. Hugs can help children grow.

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A hug is a way to communicate love, care, and concern. A hug is a message that needs no words. The person receiving a hug feels loved and cared for.

Gentle touch is a powerful way to comfort young children. Gentle touch, like a hug or back rub, tells them that they are loved. It also helps to calm their stress response. Research finds that wanted hugs can increase hormones that have positive benefits. For example, oxytocin, which is helpful when our bodies feel stressed or when we experience negative emotions, is released during gentle touch.

Hugs can be a helpful way to comfort children when they feel disappointment, frustration, fatigue, or experience physical hurt. Gentle touch such as a hug or massage lowers stress hormones and blood pressure and boosts the immune system, which are important for overall health.

Hugs can also support children's self-esteem. Children can learn that giving hugs is one way they can connect and give and receive love.

Hugs are also a great way to say, “I’m proud of you!” or “I am happy for you.” Hugs can happen as a way to connect. In the morning, take 20 seconds to cuddle your child with a good morning hug. This is a good way to start the morning and show your love and care. These longer hugs and cuddling can also be a nice way to say good night.

Hugging offers so many benefits and so does body autonomy. What does this mean? Children’s bodies belong to them. They are in charge of their bodies. Children should be respected for their choices about when and who gives them hugs.

First, hugs should be given freely, with no strings attached.

Second, as an adult, you are the comforter. Give hugs to show a child that they are loved and to help them to feel better.

Third, giving a hug should be a choice the child makes. Ask the child, “Do you want a hug?” instead of “Give me a hug.” You may need to help your child with extended family members who may be excited and want to give your child a hug. Support your child in kindly refusing and offer [other ways to connect, such as a high-five or fist bump](#). For younger children, the adult can say, “It looks like Ben needs some time to warm up before giving you a hug.” If your child does not want to have a hug or high-five, then support your child in knowing this is ok. It is their body, and they get to decide. Sometimes these situations can be uncomfortable. That is ok.

“Can I give you a hug?” – ok!

“Give me a hug.” – not ok.

Your child relies on you to feel safe and secure. If you ask your child for a hug to help you feel better, you are making your child responsible for your feelings. When children feel responsible for their parent’s feelings, they are less likely to see them as strong, capable adults who can care for their needs. That can be scary.



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What if your child decides to hug you when you are upset? That's great! When your child freely chooses to give you a hug to help you feel better, your child is showing you that he or she understands and has learned how to be a caring person.

So give more hugs throughout your day (with consent) and support children in getting all the benefits from hugging

Links:

High five or hug? Teaching toddlers about consent:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2987-high-five-or-hug-teaching-toddlers-about-consent>

Elmo's virtual hug: <https://www.sesamestreet.org/videos?vid=26416>