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I am a 6th grade teacher and I have a concern. Some of my students approach me to

hug me and to receive hugs. My students are from low income families and have

many emotional needs. My problem is that I'm afraid that I could be accused of

sexual misconduct by a student if my hugs were misinterpreted. How do I avoid any

accusations and not hurt my students' feelings?

A. This is a question that most educators ponder everyday. It is hard not to reach out to a

child in need. In an effort to avoid accusations of misconduct, many schools have

implemented so-called "no touch" policies, outlawing teacher-to-student physical

contact – and sometimes even contact between students. Some physical acts

obviously are inappropriate – like holding a fourth-grader in your lap, or rubbing a

student's shoulders. But in schools without "no contact" rules, teachers don't always

know what kinds of contact might cross the line. To play it safe, they avoid any

contact at all. However, without physical touch, "children fail to develop cognitively,

physically, emotionally, and socially," writes Frances M. Carlson in ***The National*** □□□□□□□□

□□□□ ***Child Advocate*** "A lot of kids feel like contaminated goods if grownups don't touch

them," adds researcher Nan Stein, author of ***Classrooms and Courtrooms: Facing*** □□□□□
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□□□□ ***Sexual Harassment in K-12 Schools*** "They read something very negative into that,

like, 'You don't want to touch me because I'm dirty.'"In many low income

homes kids are starved for affection and attention. It's not that their parents don't love

them but one on one time is often challenging if you are working two jobs and all your

energies are put into paying the rent and buying clothes and food. Unfortunately, this

leaves many of our kids looking for affection through sex and gangs.

The experts at Tolerance.org website provide the following

□□□□ **suggestions:**□

Do:

- **Engage in age-appropriate forms of "non-sexual touching."** This means, in Carlson's words, "the touch must meet a child's age-appropriate expectations, as well as meet standards for what each individual child finds acceptable."

- **Use what one researcher calls the "Touch Test":** "Would you allow a stranger, teacher, coach, counselor, or anyone with whom you do not have a close personal or familial relationship to do this to you? Your answer to this can tell you whether or not your touch is appropriate."

- **Consider the student's needs.** The *Council for Exceptional Children* suggests the following question: "Does he or she want to be touched or hugged? Some children who have been abused or who have tactile issues do not want to be touched. In fact, touching or hugging such a child may escalate a situation rather than enhance it."

- **Respect physical boundaries.** According to research on children and touch, students often feel most comfortable with touches to the arms and shoulders. Touches to the head and hands also were acceptable. More intimate – and, therefore, less acceptable – were touches to the legs or chest.

- **Teach students the difference between appropriate and inappropriate contact.** Stud

ents who can understand and articulate appropriate boundaries are more likely to resist sexual abuse and speak up when they witness or are targeted for inappropriate behavior.

- **Examine and discuss relevant school policies with peers.** "The faculty and the administrators need to talk about what is appropriate adult-to-student contact..." adds Stein.

Don't:

- **Excessively engage in any form of touching** (hugging, putting an arm around a student, etc.).
- **Give gifts to individual students.** This is a common tactic used by abusive adults when they begin "grooming" their victims.
- **Spend significant out-of-school time with a single student,** another common grooming technique. Researchers say the majority of teacher-to-student sexual misconduct that involves physical abuse (molestation, rape, etc.) happens off of school property.
- **Share overly personal or private information with students** — information you would normally reserve for other adults. This interferes with students' ability to create, interpret and enforce normal, healthy boundaries.
- **Use online communications for personal interactions.** Today, the notion of teacher-to-student "contact" also applies to the virtual world.
- **Ignore your gut instincts.** While we shouldn't become suspicious every time another teacher gives a student a hug, we should keep our antennas alert for [warning signs](#), and be willing to voice concerns to a school official.

Visit www.Tolerance.org website and www.nationalcac.org for more detailed information.

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