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Archdiocese of Los Angeles - Our Lady of the Angels Region

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Protecting God's Children for Adults

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Touch (A Sensitive Subject)

By [Patrick McGuire](#)

In one of my facilitator training sessions, I encountered a school official who flatly stated she refused to ever touch a student under any circumstances. I've been told, by another facilitator, of a priest who was terrified every Sunday because of a small girl who always ran up to hug him after mass. The poor man said he just froze and had no idea how to react. We have to be aware of the fact that children often exhibit displays of physical affection. We also have to be aware that this is a perfectly normal part of their continuing development. And as such, we as adults are required to direct that development appropriately.



But that does not mean we can be cavalier about physical contacts with minors. I follow a simple guideline with regard to touching any child, and it is defined by the acronym PAN: If you do touch a child make sure it is PUBLIC, APPROPRIATE, and NON-SEXUAL. Let's face it, most children, especially young ones, display affection very easily. They hug people they like. They lean against people if they feel uneasy or frightened. They burrow in if they are crying—you name it. Another truth about children is that they absolutely require physical affection. They need to know at an instinctual level that grown-ups care about them. Scruffing their hair, side hugs, high fives, back pats, and other physical attentions reinforce a child's perceptions of what is acceptable in society. Without them, children begin to wonder why no one likes them. They NEED that affection to develop normally, and they need it from more than their parents. It is our responsibility to show our charges what is appropriate, not just behaviorally, but with their physical beings as well. It's a topic that is easy to forget when we are terrified we'll be accused of something we never intended. And it really is not that hard to keep on the right side of the line.



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Patrick McGuire

Patrick McGuire, MSW, presently serves as Assistant Director For Training and Education for the Safe Environment Program of the Archdiocese of New York. His present responsibilities include developing resources for the Archdiocesan Safe Environment Program, training facilitators to host Protecting God's Children, and coordinating the training programs of the Safe Environment Office. He has been active in church youth ministry for over 25 years. He has developed and directed homeless outreach programs for the Chatham-Savannah Authority for the Homeless and served as a field instructor for graduate and undergraduate social work students for Savannah State University in Savannah, GA. He served on the development board and was an inaugural board member for the Savannah Area Behavioral Health Collaborative. He has served on numerous community outreach boards and committees. He professional

When that little girl comes running up to you after the school play to give you a hug, give her a brief side hug back, long enough to say she's great. When that 250-pound football player comes up to shake the hand on your 5 foot frame at graduation, give him a firm handshake back long enough to say good luck with every ounce of sincere pride you have. When you have to reprimand a child for their performance, look them in the eye with a hand on their shoulder so they know you may be upset with them, but you are not ashamed to be near them.

experience includes service as a wilderness counselor for at-risk teens and serving in several capacities in the foster care system.

When a child offers a display of sincere affection, don't dare spurn them. That action can be damaging in itself. Be public, appropriate, and, of course, non-sexual about it. If you are still uncertain about this, think of it this way: If we don't provide the affection these children require, there are folks out there who will be happy to do that, and more, in our place.

1) Which of the following are appropriate forms of physical affection to show a young person?

- A) Side hugs
- B) High fives
- C) "Bear" hugs
- D) Handshakes
- E) All of the above
- F) A, B, and D only

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