Book Review

Don't touch! The educational story of a panic. Heather Piper and Ian Stronach. London, Routledge, 2008. 167pp, ISBN 978-0-415-42008-2 £19.99.

Many practitioners know intuitively that touch is necessary for healthy development, and research is increasingly unequivocal about its central importance in child development. Yet many children and young people in residential child care have experienced transgressive touch in the forms of physical and/ or sexual abuse, or have experienced touch deprivation (or both). This complicates what might be seen as 'natural' integration of touch into day-to-day care practices.

The place of touch in residential child care practice is further complicated by the current moral panic in society about the touching of children. In their book Don't touch! The educational story of a panic, Piper and Stronach explore the prevailing discourse about the dangerous nature of touch, based on the findings of a large-scale study that analysed touch-related documentation from over 400 settings involving children. They also carried out case studies in five different schools, observing and interviewing pupils and teachers and analysing their touch-related documentation. The schools included a preschool, a primary /junior school, a secondary school, a school that catered to children with severe physical and emotional difficulties, and a residential school, with a chapter dedicated to each case study. Thus the book is extremely useful not only for helping practitioners to understand the wider context of fear about the touching of children, but also because of the similarities between settings which allow parallel to be drawn with residential child care.

In their preface, Piper and Stronach offer the premise for their research, confirmed by an earlier, small-scale study, that:

> ... the touching of children in professional settings had increasingly stopped being relaxed, or instinctive, or primarily concerned with responding to the needs of the child. It was becoming a self-conscious negative act, requiring mind-body split for both children and adults, the latter being controlled more by fear than a commitment to caring (p. iix).

Their analysis of the touch-related documentation revealed a disproportionate response to an exaggerated risk of harm to children by adults touching them. Much of the documentation was aimed at protecting staff and organisations from false accusation or from a child misconstruing their actions. Piper and Stronach initially intended to assist agencies in the development of touch-related guidelines, but over the course of the study they concluded that guidelines tended, overall, to have a more negative impact than positive contribution. They found that such guidelines reflect and embody touch-related fears, escalating them rather than engendering confidence.

The findings of the case studies also supported Piper and Stronach's abovestated premise. Even schools that described themselves in 'touchy-feely' terms exhibited self-defensive

practices and confusion about legislation and guidelines. Practices were predicated on a presumption of possible guilt. While the importance of touch in the development of children was acknowledged, there was no agreement as to the parameters of its use. As the authors state, 'In short, the case studies confirmed that professionals and carers have learned how not to trust themselves, and to call that damaging condition 'safety" (p.13 7).

There was, however, one exception: Summerhill School. Summerhill is a residential 'free' school where class attendance is voluntary. Pupils and staff decide how the school is run, on a 'one person, one vote' system. The mechanism for this process is the Meeting, where issues of privacy, rights and the proper running of the school are openly discussed and debated, with decisions being made on this basis.

Close relationships amongst children and staff are also central to the way this school works. Within Summerhill, Piper and Stronach found that touch is not a sensitive issue. It is so embedded into relationships that attempts to portray it as a separate phenomenon are nonsensical. Some of the staff and young people found the concept of 'no-touch' policies inconceivable, and the researchers stated that they felt 'ridiculous' or 'pervy' when they attempted to bring up touch-related questions.

Because the Meeting promotes openness, exploration and democracy, secrets are rare or non-existent. The school, and the students within it, are also well equipped to address transgressions whether or not they relate to touch. It seems that because day-to-day minor transgressions are addressed consistently and openly, more significant transgressions are much less possible.

Summerhill does not explicitly cater to children (or families) experiencing difficulties. It has not suffered scandals of abuse. Its workers do not work under the shadow of suspicion by association, and it has managed to resist significant contamination by the media and by audit cultures. Yet, significant parallels with residential child care can still be drawn. Summerhill does appear to identify its primary task in broader developmental terms. Its work is carried out within a highly relational context, and construction. of meaning is a central component of the work.

In our struggle to keep touch integrated as a natural and essential part of providing care to children, we are wise to resist it being separated from the wider context of relationships. Don't touch! offers important conceptual reinforcement for that struggle, enabling a clearer view of the problem and a glimpse of an alternative way of being with children and young people. It also challenges assumptions that the current direction of overly prescriptive, fear-based policies and practices are inevitable. It is well written, engaging and offers a fresh and welcome perspective on this complex and important dimension of practice.

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