

Physical Contact Guidelines at MEC



The types and amount of physical contact that we have with Under 18s varies hugely across ages and developmental stages. Children use touch to communicate, feel secure, learn, comfort themselves, and understand their world.

Our overarching principle across most ages is to allow children to be the ones who initiate physical contact, not adults as this ensures that they are comfortable with whatever contact occurs. Physical contact should end when the child indicates that they are finished (unless there is a health or safety reason, or you are returning a distressed child to a parent)

All of the guidelines below work alongside other MEC ministry principles which highlight the need to make sure that we are not alone 1:1 with Under 18s in a space that is out of the sight of others.

0-2 Years

- If a child is distressed in this age group, it is OK to pick them up, rock them or hold them while we assess the reason for tears (E.g. hunger, dirty nappy, separation issues). Be respectful if the child has indicated that they don't want this to happen.
- You may need to carry a child in this age group briefly
- It is OK to hug children back when they initiate, or allow them to crawl on your lap for a short time if they initiate, but adults should not initiate either of those things
- Similarly, it is OK to hold a child's hand, if they initiate or for purposes of moving children from one place to another

3-5 Years

Children at this age are becoming more independent and self-aware

- If they are distressed we should try talking first to understand the cause of their distress
- We can offer side-by-side hugs, or try redirection to interesting toys, people, or activities
- Children at this age have the right to refuse touch and we need to be respectful of that (except in safety issues such as first aid)
- If children initiate a front-to-front hug, acknowledge them verbally, and with three quick pats on the back, then separate
- Be aware of touching activities (E.g. tickling and hair braiding) which can be misinterpreted
- It is never OK to use physical discipline in church programs

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Primary School Aged Children

- Side-by-side hugs are OK if initiated by the child
- If a child initiates a front-to-front hug, acknowledge them with three friendly pats to the back, then break away
- If the child is distressed, comfort them with words, or by patting them on the upper back, shoulders, or arms
- Only use physical restraint in the most extreme cases (i.e. for the child's safety, or that of others). Try verbal reasoning, involving parents, removing the child, removing other children, modifying the program for the child or reducing the child's time at the program.

High School

Be aware of gender issues at this age.

- Reassure distressed young people verbally where possible. It may be OK to use brief touch on shoulders, arms or upper back, but be aware about the message you are sending
- Wherever possible, use a side-to-side hug but if offered a front to front hug keep it brief and appropriate
- Don't ever restrain High School students
- Be aware of making the context in which you are interacting with High Schoolers as public as possible