Adult-initiated touch and its functions at a Swedish preschool: controlling, affectionate, assisting and educative haptic conduct

Disa Bergnehr & Asta Cekaite

To cite this article: Disa Bergnehr & Asta Cekaite (2018) Adult-initiated touch and its functions at a Swedish preschool: controlling, affectionate, assisting and educative haptic conduct, International Journal of Early Years Education, 26:3, 312-331, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2017.1414690

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2017.1414690
Adult-initiated touch and its functions at a Swedish preschool: controlling, affectionate, assisting and educative haptic conduct

Disa Bergnehr and Asta Cekaite

School of Health and Welfare, Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden; Department of Child Studies, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT
The present study examines adult–child touch and its functions in a Swedish preschool (for 1 to 5-year-old children). The data are naturalistic observations and video-recorded data of everyday preschool activities. The study describes the frequently occurring functions of educators’ haptic conduct (control, affectionate, affectionate-control, assisting and educative touch), discussing them in relation to the children’s age, gender and type of the preschool activity. It reveals the complexity of touch, demonstrating that physical contact is used for a variety of purposes in the educators’ daily work. The educators employed touch without force, and the children did not respond with explicit and forceful resistance (such as pushing back or otherwise protesting). Adult-initiated haptic behaviour served a continuum of social purposes – from social–relational work, such as establishing and building affectively positive, caring, social relations, to practical and educative organisational efforts to manage the complex and busy preschool life. The distribution of adult–child touch categories brings attention to the bodily aspects of the early childhood educational setting and highlights some of the ways in which the requirements of the Swedish curriculum for Preschool and its focus on educare are actualised in the educators’ embodied conduct.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 March 2017
Accepted 29 October 2017

KEYWORDS
Adult–child interactions; touch; early childhood education; educare; embodiment

Introduction
In the evolution of the senses the sense of touch was undoubtedly the first to come into being. Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. (…) Though it may vary structurally and functionally with age, touch remains a constant, the foundation upon which all other senses are based. (Montagu 1971/1986, 3–4)

Physical contact is an integrated part of life. Humans, as well as animals, have haptic needs, and the tactile system is the earliest sensory system to develop (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011; Montagu 1971/1986). Haptic interaction between humans occurs at all
ages and is essential to human growth, development and well-being (Montagu 1971/1986). Touch is also a distinctive form of communication: it is intrinsically interactional and dialogic: ‘One cannot touch and, at the same time, be uninvolved with the other person’ (Jones and Yarborough 1985, 51), and one cannot touch another without being touched (Csordas 2008; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Despite or possibly due to its being an intrinsic part of human life, touch is often connected to moral concerns about too little touch (e.g. between parent and infant) or to too much touch (e.g. between professional and child). In these debates, some types of haptic conduct are highlighted while others are ignored. However, physical interaction has many forms and functions and is neither wholly good nor wholly bad.

The present study aims to examine the variety and functions of touch that occur spontaneously in everyday adult–child social interactions at a Swedish preschool. The research interest stems from the fact that today many young children spend a considerable amount of time in early childhood institutions, outside of the private realm of the family (Wells and Bergnehr 2014). Thus, day-care and preschool educators play an important role in children’s socialisation and development. Accordingly, it is important to gain more knowledge about the characteristics of adult–child relations in these settings, including their haptic features. Our focus is on adult-initiated haptic contact between preschool educators and 1- to 5-year-old children. By using naturalistic observations and video-recorded data of everyday activities, we examine the communicative functions and frequency of adult-initiated touch conduct. The merits of video-recordings, rather than, for instance, observations, are that the recordings can be viewed repeatedly and in slow motion (Bakeman 2005), and that multimodal conduct can be included in the analyses (Cekaite 2010). Here, we specifically illuminate the different functions of touch, and how various types of haptic contact are used in relation to the child’s age, gender and the specific preschool activity.

**Previous research**

Half a century ago, John Bowlby emphasised the importance of touch for caregiver–infant attachment (1969), and recent research taking medical, psychological and neurobiological perspectives has argued that haptic interaction is beneficial for children and adults alike (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011; Uvnäs Moberg 2013). Haptic conduct influences our social experiences in a particular way: ‘touching another or letting another to touch oneself has a potential to escalate the balance of intimacy’ (Cekaite 2010, 5), and haptic engagement is thus inextricably related to the incipient creation of affective and social relations (Goodwin 2017). However, the persons involved do not always experience touch positively: embodied acts can also be physically forceful and violent. The risks of touch have been emphasised, not least those associated with touch contact between professionals and children in educational settings, including child-care and preschool centres. It has been argued, for instance, that the child’s integrity has to be protected from physical control and force, and that ‘no touch zones’ can prevent acts of sexual and physical abuse as well as accusations of such abuse (Piper and Smith 2003).

The bulk of prior research on adult–child touch has focused on haptic interaction in family settings (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011), but touch conduct can vary in form and function depending on the age, gender, activity and sociocultural contexts of those involved (Jones and Yarborough 1985). The uses of touch as a prevalent socialising
resource have been investigated from a neo-Vygotskian psychological perspective (Rogoff 1990) and in anthropological studies. Together they demonstrate that, in non-Western contexts such as South America and Africa, touch – in addition to other sensory modalities (talk, vision, smell) – is recurrently used in toddler apprenticeship and extensive caretaking situations (de Leon 1998; Lancy 2015).

Recently, research deploying video-observational data from informal and formal adult–child social situations has provided insights into the multiple socialising functions of touch deployed in Western contexts (Goodwin, 2006). It demonstrates the complex nature of touch, and the variety of forms and functions entailed in physical contact. Studies have shown that touch is recurrently used in calibration of a child’s attention (Cekaite 2016; Goodwin 2006), and adults (teachers or parents) often use touch as a way to control a child’s bodily conduct, movement and location. Such uses of control touch have been explored in several studies conducted in Swedish primary school classrooms (with 7- to 8-year-old children) and in Swedish and American families (5- to 10-year-old children) (Cekaite 2010, 2016; Goodwin 2006; Goodwin and Cekaite 2013). Cekaite (2010) introduced the term ‘shepherding’ to describe and conceptualise how adults employ embodied acts for the purpose of directing, steering and monitoring a child’s bodily conduct and locomotion (e.g. when transitioning the child to a new activity). Shepherding touch is not used in a forceful manner; the touch intended to ‘get things done’ by monitoring a child’s conduct, and is usually used together with verbal directives telling the child what needs to be done (Cekaite 2010).

Another prominent function of touch is to show affection (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011). Affectionate touch displays positive emotions and togetherness, as seen in, for instance, parent–child hugging (Goodwin 2017). Adults’ affectionate haptic interaction with young children (frequent in Swedish preschool settings) also involves haptic comforting and soothing. The adults use stroking or envelop a crying child in temporally sustained embraces (Cekaite and Kvist Holm 2017). Various functions and the complex features of touch have been demonstrated in a study on haptic interaction in a U.S. child-care institution. In addition to affectionate contact, and physical retrieval strategies such as shepherding, caretaking touch aimed at assisting with, e.g. hygiene or clothing, was common, as well as controlling touch used to get another person’s attention or to change someone’s behaviour, and instructive touch when guiding the child in a learning task. In addition, the study suggested that young children (3- to 4-year-olds) engage in more haptic contact than do older children (5- to 6-year-olds) (Fleck and Chavajay 2009). Other studies have also provided support for the finding that younger children (e.g. infants and toddlers) require and are involved in more haptic contact with adults than are older preschool children (Cigales et al. 1996).

Gendered aspects of the frequency and function of touch in preschool settings have thus far received scant research attention, as have the relation between touch and the specific preschool activity. However, Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010) demonstrate in their study on Japanese preschools, that educators used touch to instruct the children about appropriate gender conduct, and Twardosz et al. (1987) have suggested that the functions and frequency of haptic interaction are related to the type of preschool activity.

In correspondence with previous research, we explore touch patterns in relation to the children’s age and gender, as well as in relation to the particular preschool activity. By using naturalistic observations and video-recorded data from everyday activities, the
The present study investigates adult-initiated haptic contact between adults and 1- to 5-year-old children in a Swedish preschool. The following questions are in focus: What are the functions of adult–child touch? How frequently do the educators use touch and how is the frequency and functions of adult–child touch related to the children’s age, gender and the preschool activity? The present study combines qualitative analyses with descriptive statistics on the use of touch.

Early childhood education in Sweden

In Sweden, 83 per cent of the 1- to 5-year-old children attend public or private preschools (2016a). The preschools combine day-care and education, and the work is organised according to the Swedish Curriculum for the Preschool (2010; 2016). The curriculum stipulates that:

The preschool should lay the foundations for lifelong learning. The preschool should be enjoyable, secure, and rich in learning for all children. (…) Activities should be based on a holistic view of the child and his or her needs and be designed so that care, socialisation and learning together form a coherent whole. (Swedish Preschool Curriculum 2010)

Teaching, caring for and nurturing children imply work with children’s moral and social development. Such work is inextricably related to the establishment of close and trusting relationships between children and adults and within the children’s peer groups.

Because preschools in Sweden are attended by children of a considerable age span (1–5 years), preschool activities are organised to suit children with varying cognitive, verbal and physical skills. Frequently, the preschool organisation is divided into age-based sections: a section for younger children (1–3-year-olds) and a section for older children (3–5-year-olds) (Skolverket 2016d). While the preschool activities for both age groups aim to provide high-quality care and education, the older children participate in more activities where learning is in focus, for instance, practising basic mathematics and Swedish language. However, non-instructed playtime, called free-play, makes up a significant portion of the preschool day for all children (Cekaite and Evaldsson 2017; Swedish Preschool Curriculum 2010).

In addition to the Curriculum objectives to provide care and education, the general preschool system is a political measure to support and promote gender equality and female employment (Wells and Bergnehr 2014). The dominant political discourse in Sweden has since the 1930s promoted public child-care, in order to increase fertility rates and family formation, and to provide propitious circumstances for children’s development and well-being (Halldén 2007). In the 1960s and 1970s, extensive reforms were inaugurated to encourage female labour force participation and dual-earner families (Ohlander 1994). To encourage preschool attendance, fees are low and the municipalities have to guarantee preschool placement for all children above one year of age. Moreover, the 3–5-year-olds are offered 525 preschool hours or more (depending on the local authority) that are free of charge (Skolverket 2016b).

Over the past decades, political initiatives have been taken to secure that the care and learning offered at the preschools are of high quality. The quality has been connected to the staff being properly educated, and accordingly, one objective has been to increase the number of preschool teachers (Björk-Willén and Aronsson 2014; Skolverket 2016d). In
2015, 42 per cent of the staff in Swedish preschools were preschool teachers, 33 per cent had training in child-care or education, while 25 per cent had no documented training in either child-care or education. Mostly women work in Swedish preschools: 96 per cent are females – a stable figure during the past decade (2016c).

**Method**

The present study was conducted in a public Swedish preschool for 1–5-year-old children. The data collection process started out by a formal request to the municipality’s education department and school leadership: Would they be interested in participating in the study? School leaders then were asked to enquire preschool personnel whether they were interested in taking part. Following the consent of the preschool staff, parents at the preschool were informed and their consent was obtained. The research team was external to the setting and had no affiliation to the preschool or to the municipality.

The families that participated in the study resided, and the preschool was located, in a suburban middle-class area with mainly semi-detached or detached houses. The data consist of 24 hours of video-recordings from two sections at the preschool: a section for younger children, 1–3-year-olds, and a section for older children, 3–5-year-olds.

The data were collected for the purpose of investigating the recurrent practices of children’s emotional and moral socialisation in early childhood education, as part of a larger project. Our theoretical perspective involves the qualitative approach that engages in the interpretative understanding of human beings. It is also informed by the notion that social life, i.e. communicative acts, is ubiquitously embodied and intersubjective, and as such, constituted by the sociocultural context. Moreover, the mind and body are integrated, and ‘… the body is a sentient being’ (Crossley 1995, 46; Merleau-Ponty 1964). We believe that knowledge production is context dependent, and since the social and cultural contexts are prone to change, knowledge is not static; the analytical work is indeed subjectively permeated, informed and inspired by our theoretical stance. The importance of haptic contact in the adult–child interaction surfaced during the scrutiny and inductive coding of the recordings, and was further explored.

The Regional Ethical Board has approved of the project. Written and oral information was provided to the staff and parents. A consent form was signed for those adults who wished to participate. Participation was voluntary and the staff and the parents were informed of their right to decline participation at any time without any specific reason. When approaching the children in order to record, the researcher recurrently asked the children whether they were ok with being filmed (and of having the researcher close by, observing them). While video recording, the researcher was sensitive to the reactions of the children and the staff and stopped when there were signs of discomfort, such as the child making an angry face towards her, or the child turning away from the camera as a sign of protest. To protect the identification of the participants, detailed information about the preschool and the staff (such as age and years of experience) is not provided, and the figures that we use to illustrate different functions of touch are anonymised.

In total, 322 episodes of adult-initiated haptic contact have been identified in the data: nine educators (all females, tempoing staff included) initiated haptic contact with the 35 children. Fifteen children were 1–3 years old (nine girls and six boys), and 20 children were 3–5 years old (10 girls and 10 boys).
The data consist of 8 video-recorded hours of preschool activities in the younger children’s group, 12 hours with older children, and 4 hours of mixed-age group activities in which children from both sections participated because the groups used the same indoor areas during drop-off and pick-up times (i.e. in the morning and afternoon/evening), and sometimes, but rarely, during the day. The data were collected during two periods (spring and autumn 2015). The recordings documented indoor activities that were part of the regular preschool day: (a) free-play activity when the children were free to choose with whom and what to play, and when they socialised in smaller friendship groups; (b) circle time when all or most of the children participated in the teacher-led educational activities; (c) cleaning-up time, when children and educators put away toys at the end of a free-play session; (d) book reading: usually one teacher read a book to a smaller group of children and (e) transition time, when the children and adults physically transitioned from one activity to another, for instance, when the children needed to assemble in order to dress for outdoor play, or to tend to hygiene or after lunch or simply when they moved from one activity location to another (e.g. walking collectively from a free-play room to lunch).

**Analytical conduct**

The study adopts an inductive analytical approach, where haptic contact between adult and child is the overall research interest. Analytically, video-data do not provide access to an individual’s bodily experience. Rather, the analytical focus is on the touch and its publicly manifested uptake, displayed through the visible actions of the participants, that is, the embodied actions of the adult and the embodied responses of the child.

The analysis began with the authors repeatedly viewing the video-data. Episodes of touch, ‘defined as any form of body to body contact between individuals’ (Fleck and Chavajay 2009, 49), were identified and noted. The initial indexing showed that adult-initiated, purposeful touch was frequently used. Such haptic contact was further categorised with regard to its different functions and forms. The function (i.e. the communicative meaning) depended on the form of touch, situational context and verbalisation that accompanied its use. Each touch episode was categorised according to its main communicative function, and the persons involved were noted (i.e. the pseudonym of the adult, and the pseudonym, age and gender of the child). Touch was accepted or rejected, such as when a recipient did not respond in requested ways (moved away, grimaced), but no instances of violent physical conduct (hitting, pushing) were documented. The categorisation of touch functions was initially inspired by previous literature on the forms and functions of haptic contact (e.g. Cekaite 2010, 2016; Fleck and Chavajay 2009; Goodwin and Cekaite 2013; Jones and Yarborough 1985), but we also found the haptic contact to be more intricate and complex than what has been suggested previously. The updated coding and analysis were presented and discussed at local, national and international seminars. Repeated discussions within a research group, in addition to methodological workshops, involving other colleagues contributed in part to supporting the definition of categories and the analytical process. This said, the boundaries and distinctions between the different categories are not definite, but are considerably open, and the meaning of touch is contextually dependent and sometimes overlapping. Further work is needed to fine-tune the functional categories of touch.
The quantitative analysis in the present study involves descriptive statistics. Touch episodes per minute were counted in relation to age, gender, activity and function. Figures 9 and 11 present touches per minute for the total duration of time each age group was recorded. Figures 10 and 12 show touches per minute by gender, calculated in relation to the total recorded time. Figure 13 shows touches per minute for the duration of the specific activity.

Results

The results section starts by presenting the different functions of touch that emerged during the qualitative analysis. This section is followed by quantitative explorations of touch episodes in relation to the children’s age, gender, activity and function.

The functions of touch

The coding of the functions of touch generated the following categories: Controlling, Affectionate, Affectionate-controlling, Assisting and Educatve. These categories are defined and exemplified below:

- **Control touch**: Touch is used to control and direct the child’s behaviour, bodily movements, or attention, or to discipline the child. The haptic forms used involve holding, steering, taps, pats, lifting, carrying and other uses of the hands to direct the recipient’s bodily movements, stabilise his/her bodily actions or direct his/her attention.
- **Affectionate touch**: Touch is used to show fondness, to comfort, or to express praise and approval. The haptic forms deployed are embracing, holding someone in one’s lap, patting, stroking, caressing and hugging.
- **Affectionate-control touch**: Affectionate touch is used together with a controlling act; the function is to control – in a mitigated way – the child’s bodily position or orientation. The haptic forms involve a stroke on the arm, a half-embrace, or lifting the child gently and putting the child in one’s lap to control the child’s bodily conduct.
- **Assisting touch**: Touch is used to help the child; the adult uses haptic contact when attending to the child’s bodily well-being, for instance, assisting with acts of hygiene, during clothing and mealtimes.
- **Educative touch**: Touch is used to instruct about objects or concepts and guide the child in educational situations. The haptic forms involve: tapping the child’s fingers while counting to 10, touching or gently lifting the child’s legs while verbally referring to the concepts of ‘right’ or ‘left’.

All forms and functions of adult–child touch were frequently, but not always, combined with verbal expressions. During the analysis, prominent functional subtypes of Control touch evolved (Shepherding, Disciplining and Attention-getting), and of Affectionate touch (Amicable, Rewarding and Comforting). The subtypes of Control and Affectionate touch, and Affectionate-control touch are illustrated by Figures 1–8.
Figure 1. Shepherding.

Figure 2. a and b: Disciplining.

Figure 3. a and b: Attention-getting.
Shepherding: when the adult uses physical contact to guide and direct the child’s locomotion to a particular place by slightly pushing or pulling the child, or by lifting and carrying the child to the relevant activity (Cekaite 2010). For example, the adult shepherds – steers the child’s locomotion (from lunch table to restroom) while holding her hands on the child’s shoulders. (Figure 1).

Disciplining touch is used to discipline the child when the child resists or objects to what is expected of her/him. Disciplining touch can involve placing both hands or one hand on the child’s arms, arm or shoulder, and is often overlaid with talk that clarifies for the child the requested action or that involves a reprimand. For example, the adult gently pulls a young child down from standing on the sofa, arranging her in a sitting position. (Figure 2).

Figure 4. a–c: Amicable.

Figure 5. Comforting.
• Attention-getting touch: when the adult requires the child’s attention to the on-going activity or an object or directs the child’s gaze using taps, pats or strokes. For example, the adult stops a girl by touching her arm and telling her to start tidying up. (Figure 3).

In affectionate touch, similar forms of haptic conduct – hugs, taps, caresses – are used for slightly varying affectionate purposes. The subcategories of Affectionate touch are: Amicable, Comforting, Rewarding, and Affectionate-Controlling (Figures 4–8).

• Amicable touch, which involves haptic conduct that demonstrates affection, for instance, hugging, stroking, engaging in an embrace or side-by-side hug. Amicable touch is not instigated by situational demands, rather, the adult uses touch to show closeness and intimacy. For example, the adult spontaneously embraces, hugs and strokes the child during book reading. (Figure 4)

• Comforting touch is used in response to the child’s distress and involves hugs, strokes, caresses, for instance when soothing and consoling a crying child (Cekaite and Kvist Holm 2017). For example, the adult uses a half-embrace in comforting a crying child and simultaneously places her hand on another upset girl. (Figure 5).

• Rewarding touch, in the form of a stroke, hug or pat, is deployed as an affectionate evaluation of the child’s actions, for instance when the child has accomplished a certain thing or has behaved well; it is usually overlaid with talk. For example, a boy receives a short pat from the educator as he participates quietly in preparations for circle time. (Figure 6).

• Affectionate-control touch comprises heterogeneous haptic and verbal acts aimed at getting the child’s attention or disciplining the child. The controlling act is mitigated with positive affect. As demonstrated (Figure 7, Figure 8):

![Figure 6. Rewarding.](image-url)
During a book-reading activity, the adult uses a half-embrace when the boy is not attending to the book (Figure 7). Also, controlling and affectionate touch can be overlaid with mild, mitigated disciplining. The adult gently holds a boy to face her and half-embraces him while mildly reproaching him for his earlier misconduct. (Figure 8):

**The frequency of touch**

The following sections describe the distribution and frequency of the functions of touch. Of the total of 322 adult-initiated touch episodes, 134 were Control touch, 81 Affectionate touch, 67 Affectionate-controlling touch, 28 Assisting touch and 12 Educative touch. In the category of Control touch, the subcategory Shepherding dominates in numbers, particularly among the younger children, followed by Disciplining, and only a few instances of Attention-getting. In the category of Affectionate touch, Amicable touch is most common in both age groups, while Comforting touch is the second largest subcategory. There were
only two episodes of Rewarding touch in both age groups. The subcategories are not accounted for in the following analysis of the frequency of touch.

Our calculation of touch episodes per minute in relation to age shows that the younger children were involved in adult-initiated haptic contact three times more often than the children who were 3–5 years old (Figure 9).

The younger children received more haptic contact; they not only needed more assistance and comforting, but also sought bodily contact more frequently than the older children did.

When gender and touch patterns are examined, a slight difference appears in that the girls were involved in more adult-initiated touch than the boys were (Figure 10).

A total of 19 girls and 16 boys participated, and the difference in their number, together with the fact that the younger group had three girls who were younger than 1.5 years old, may have contributed to the relative differences in the number and functions of touch (because younger children, here, toddler girls, received a great deal of haptic contact: they frequently sat in an adult’s lap, needed and received more assistance with clothing and during meal times).

When examining the frequency of adult-initiated touch in relation to its functions and the children’s age, the pattern is similar in both age groups: Control touch is predominant, followed by Affectionate touch, Affectionate-controlling touch, Assisting touch and Educative touch. Due to the low number, Educative touch is excluded from the diagrams (Figure 11).

Across both age groups, the largest category observed was Control touch: the younger children received 0.103 Control touches per minute, while the older children received 0.059 Control touches per minute. The younger children also received a substantial amount of Affectionate touch. Moreover, in the group of older children, Affectionate touch was the second largest category, and Affectionate-controlling touch was the third

![Figure 9. Touches per minute by age.](image)
largest in both age groups. Touch used to assist the child was less frequent, and Educative touch was rarely used.

In both gender groups, the largest category is Control touch (girls: 0.079 per minute, and boys 0.083 per minute). The girls received almost as much Affectionate touch

Figure 10. Touches per minute by gender.

Figure 11. Touches per minute by age and function.
(0.076 per minute) as Control touch, while for boys, Affectionate-controlling touch (0.042 per minute) is the second most common after control. Figure 12 shows the frequency of touch in relation to function and gender.

The boys were subject to more physical control than the girls were, and the girls received more Affectionate touch. Besides differences in age, the gender difference in Affectionate touch is the most notable finding, although it is worth remembering that the data consist of more girls than boys (19 versus 16), and in particular, more toddler girls.

The activities in the preschool followed a similar pattern during the day, and thus it is of interest to investigate when touch is deployed, and during which activity a certain function of touch is recurrent.

As demonstrated in Figure 13, all categories of touch were found in all types of the recorded preschool activities, but there are some noticeable differences (in their frequency). Haptic interaction was most frequent per minute during the transition time, that is, when the children had to transition between (and then engage in) preschool activities. Time for cleaning up, in which all children were expected to participate, was the second largest category. Transition time and cleaning-up time have organisational similarities in that they are short in duration, recurrent in the daily life of the preschool and have a similar organisational aim: the educators organise them to get the children to finish their on-going activities and initiate a new one (e.g. transition between lunch and book reading, book reading and free-play, and similar).

Besides transition time and cleaning-up time, control touch was deployed recurrently during circle time. Here, the main focus and the requirement of the activity also place
specific demands on the child’s bodily actions and comportment. Sitting in a circle, close to other children, for a considerable amount of time and being expected to focus on the adult-led activity tend to be a challenge for many children, and the adults use many verbal directives and haptic contact to monitor the children’s attention, participation and embodied conduct. Book reading (when one adult reads to a small group of children) is characterised by various types of adult-initiated touch. When a group of children sit close to each other, the likelihood of squabbles, disturbances or chit-chat among the children increases, and thus, controlling touch is frequently used. Moreover, affectionate adult-initiated touch (hugs, half-embraces, strokes) is used because the situation is cosy and intimate. As demonstrated, during book reading and cleaning activities, Affectionate-controlling touch was deployed frequently, followed by Control touch and Affectionate touch. Given that one of the significant characteristics of Affectionate-control touch is that it mitigates adult-directives (requests to do something), softens an adult’s reproaches and disciplining, and mildly controls the child’s bodily conduct, we can say that the educators used touch to downgrade their control. Together with the Control touch category, Affectionate-control constituted the largest share of adult-initiated touch in the preschool, thus showing that the use of various ways of monitoring the children’s bodily actions was a significant aspect of touch conduct.

Free-play time, the most common and recurrent activity during the preschool day (and the most frequently recorded), showed few episodes of adult-initiated touch as measured by touch per minute. During free-play, the children acted rather independently of the adults. Particularly the older children frequently played (drawing, playing with Lego and similar) without adult-interference for a considerable amount of time.
Discussion

The present study has examined adult–child touch and its functions in a Swedish preschool. It has described the frequently occurring functions of haptic conduct, discussing them in relation to the children’s age, gender and type of the activity. In all, the study reveals the complexity of touch, demonstrating that haptic physical contact is used for a variety of purposes in the educators’ daily work/tasks. The distribution of adult–child touch categories brings attention to the bodily aspects of the early childhood educational setting and highlights some of the ways in which the requirements of the Swedish curriculum for Preschool and its focus on educare are actualised in the educators’ embodied conduct. Adult-initiated haptic behaviour serves a continuum of social purposes – from social-relational work, such as establishing and building affectively positive, caring, social relations (through Affectionate or Affectionate-controlling touch), to practical and educative organisational efforts to manage the complex and busy preschool life (through Controlling, Educative or Assisting touch).

The general pattern concerning frequency of specific touch categories was similar for younger and older children: Touch aimed at controlling was used most frequently, followed by Affectionate touch, and Affectionate-controlling touch. The educators employed controlling touch without force, and the children did not respond to these haptic control acts with explicit and forceful resistance (such as pushing back or otherwise protesting). Touch allows the adults to monitor and manage the children’s bodily participation, thereby socialising them into appropriate bodily conduct. For the adults, it becomes a tool for achieving a smooth flow of preschool practices, in which many (including very young) children have to take part collectively and where specific conduct is expected. Affectionate-controlling touch combines affection with control. On a tentative note, such adult uses of affectionate approach concurrently with a verbal mitigated reprimand can contribute to sustaining caring and trusting relationships in disciplining situations that could otherwise evoke children’s negative emotions, such as feelings of guilt, shame or anger. The educators also frequently used Affectionate touch; the most common use of Affectionate touch was to engage the child in amicable display of fondness, intimacy and care.

Touch and age

Our calculations of the frequency of adult–child touch suggest that the younger children were more often involved in haptic contact with educators than were the older children (see also Cigales et al. 1996; Fleck and Chavajay 2009). These findings lend support to prior research showing that young children (toddlers) need bodily attention and support in many areas of their daily life in preschool, and that such support is given/provided not only when dressing, eating, but also during educational activities. Feasibly, younger children need more comforting, soothing as well as mild disciplining, as indicated by recent studies (Cekaite and Kvist Holm 2017). The decrease in adult-initiated touch in the older group can also be considered in terms of the common notions in Western world cultures, according to which children need to be fostered to become independent, competent and self-reliant social actors (Lancy 2015; Rogoff 1990).
**Touch and gender**

Affectionate touch was a significant category in educators’ haptic conduct towards the girls. The boys also received Affectionate touch across the entire age span, but the frequency of Affectionate touch varied across gender groups. The boys received somewhat more Control touch compared to the girls. Several factors may have influenced these results. Gendered differences in touch behaviour can be related to traditional notions of femininity and masculinity (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011). It has also been suggested that same-gender educators and children engage in more physical contact (Perdue and Connor 1978). The staff in the current preschool consisted of females only, and this gender pattern might have had some influence on the use of touch. This said, the younger children’s group had more girl toddlers (1–2-year-olds) who indeed required a great deal of bodily support from the educators. We suggest that this area deserves further exploration. For instance, future research could examine whether girls are more likely to approach the educators and spend more time in the vicinity of adults, thereby creating conditions where they might receive more adult-initiated Affectionate touch.

**Touch and preschool activity**

Adult–child touch patterns reveal how the embodied aspects of participation in preschool activities are organised, and demonstrate how early childhood education and care are interwoven into these everyday practices. Interestingly, transition time and cleaning-up time involve most touch per minute. Here, the children need to engage in a broad variety of embodied practical actions: they need to dress, wash their hands, clean up toys or simply walk from one room to another. In these relatively short but recurrent activities, the children who needed embodied help received it, and the educators used touch (e.g. shepherding) to encourage the children to engage in relevant actions. Book reading was yet another activity in which haptic interaction was common. During the book-reading activity, the adult and children are in close proximity to each other, allowing the adult’s spontaneously initiated Affectionate contact, through stroking, hugging the children, or holding a child in one’s lap. Affectionate-controlling touch was used in such situations to mitigate conflicts among the children, to reprimand and to control the child’s body in a ‘soft’ way that was less likely to disturb the reading activity.

Interestingly, free-play, which is one of the temporally most extended activities in preschools in Sweden, contained a low rate of adult–child touch per minute (compared with other activities). Because the children acted quite independently of the educators and interacted mostly with the peer group, the educators initiated haptic contact with a child mostly in cases when they had to intervene during a conflict and mediate a resolution, or comfort the child.

**Conclusion**

Haptic conduct is an integrated part in social life; it influences our experiences and relationships (Cekaite 2010; Goodwin 2017), and it has the potential to benefit well-being and health (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011; Uvnäs Moberg 2013). Although the
importance of touch in child development and human interaction has been acknowledged for decades (e.g. Bowlby 1969), detailed work on tactile communication has been scarce (Hertenstein 2002). Studies on adult–child touch have mainly focused on parent–infant interactions (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011), and have often disregarded the influence of social context (Afifi and Johnson 2005). This is unfortunate since haptic conduct differs in form and function depending on the sociocultural setting (Jones and Yarborough 1985). The present study is set in a preschool in Sweden, and widens our understanding of how adult–child touch is used in early education contexts.

Adult-initiated touch that functions to control, to show affection, or to control with affection are the most frequent categories of touch in the data. Assisting touch occurs primarily in relation to toddlers. Educational touch that involves haptic contact in learning activities is also rare. In order to achieve the progression of activities – educational activities as well as free-play – each child has to learn to comply with general directives and behavioural norms of the educational institution. Thus the preschool teachers’ work is to a large extent characterised by conduct that socialises the children into moral and social beings. Our study shows that touch is often used while the adult concurrently is oriented towards and trying to uphold a certain activity involving several other children. The physical contact can facilitate the adult’s expression of fondness and care, or disciplining, without interrupting the on-going educational activity. Thus, haptic conduct is a significant tool in the preschool staff’s daily work. It can be suggested that, in many preschool situations, physical interaction enables the adult to notice and attend to the individual child’s needs as well as to the group’s.

Based on the results of the present paper, we encourage preschool staff and school leaders to reflect on their touch conduct and to discuss it in an open-minded manner. As demonstrated, touch is neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but can be used for a variety of purposes. We propose that future research continues to examine embodied facets of interaction in early education settings. Since a child is not a passive recipient, but responds to the adult’s conduct (in positive or resistant ways), the child’s actions and child-initiated touch merit further scrutiny. Moreover, future analyses of how talk and gesture intertwine with touch, as multimodal resources, can bring an additional understanding of how adult–child relations are constituted in everyday interactions (Cekaite 2010).

Note

1. Financial support from the Swedish Research Council for the project 'Communicating emotions, embodying morality’ is gratefully acknowledged.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Konrad Nelson and Faton Rekathati for helping out with the tables.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council under [grant number 742-2013-7626].

ORCID

Disa Bergnehr http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6357-6491
Asta Cekaite http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4580-3002

References

Communication Monographs 52: 19–56.