Affectionate touch and care: embodied intimacy, compassion and control in early childhood education

Asta Cekaite & Disa Bergnehr

To cite this article: Asta Cekaite & Disa Bergnehr (2018) Affectionate touch and care: embodied intimacy, compassion and control in early childhood education, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 26:6, 940-955, DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2018.1533710

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1533710

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 05 Nov 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 681

View Crossmark data
Affectionate touch and care: embodied intimacy, compassion and control in early childhood education

Asta Cekaite and Disa Bergnehr

Child studies, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden; Department of Teacher Training, University of Borås, Borås, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Relational care, interpersonal intimacy and emotional attunement are crucial for children’s development and wellbeing in ECEC. The present study examines how they are enacted in a Swedish preschool (for 1–5-year-olds) through recurrent adult-child physical conduct, i.e. affectionate and affectionate-controlling touch. The data consist of 24 hours of video-recorded observations of everyday activities. The study shows that educators’ Affectionate-Comforting touch was used for emotion regulation as compassionate response to children’s distress; Amicable touch engaged children in spontaneous affection; and, Affectionate-Controlling touch was used to mildly control and direct the child’s bodily conduct and participation in preschool activities, or to mitigate the educators’ verbal disciplining. The study demonstrates the emotional complexity of ECEC enacted through the practices of haptic sociality. It supports the holistic policies arguing that embodied relational care should be integrated in ECEC, contrary to ideas that connect professionalism with emotional distance and lack of physical contact.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education; touch; relational care; intimacy; compassion

Introduction

Children’s well-being and learning are dependent on relational care (Noddings 2013), that necessitates the development of interpersonal sense of intimacy, trust, and emotional attunement (Cekaite 2010; Taggart 2016). In early childhood education, care constitutes a crucial part of educators’ responsibilities because it contributes to children’s well-being that is a pre-condition for children’s learning and development. Relational conceptualizations of care involve intimacy and closeness, as well as ethical acts of empathy and compassion, realized through verbal and physical means (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Hundeide 2007; Keane 2016; Noddings 2013). In caring situations, physical contact is significant because it contributes to enduring forms of intimacy (Montagu 1986) and efficiently displays empathy and regulates recipient’s emotions (Wyschogrod 1981). Touch has long been recognized as a fundamental resource for human communication, sociality, closeness and care. It is a means of contact with the world, particularly vital to children’s social, cognitive, and physical development (Field 2014; Hertenstein et al. 2009).
Thus far, however, research on touch in ECEC is scarce. In political discourse and societal views (in, for instance, Anglo-Saxon countries), touch conduct in educational settings has been questioned, and in the wake of wider societal notions and ideologies, ‘no-touch policies’ recommended (Piper and Smith 2003). Such critical views on touch argue that policies have to protect the child’s integrity from adult physical control and force. It is also pointed out that ‘no-touch’ policies can prevent sexual and physical abuse and accusations of such abuse (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Piper and Smith 2003). However, a handful of recent studies on touch practices in ECEC have highlighted the positive aspects of physical contact between educator and a child, demonstrating that educator-child touch is used in, for instance, compassionate acts of helping, soothing and showing affection (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Fleck and Chavajay 2009; Lipponnen 2017).

In the present study, we align with research perspectives that highlight the significance of touch in human sociality and direct our attention to embodied – touch – practices of care, intimacy and compassion in the everyday life of children and staff at a Swedish preschool for 1–5-year-olds. On the basis of video-ethnographic recordings of preschool encounters, we investigate spontaneously occurring adult-initiated touch. More specifically, we examine the practices of affectionate touch as well as affectionate-controlling touch and document: (i) when and how touch is used, and (ii) how the children and educators respond to – participate in – these haptic (touch) encounters. We adopt a phenomenological notion of the subject as essentially embodied ‘being in the world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 175) who engages in intercorporeal sense-making of oneself and co-present others. Intercorporeality directs attention not only to the materiality and physicality of bodily existence, but also to the duality of the body, that of being at once sensible and sensitive; this duality is especially visible in interpersonal touch encounters. On the basis of analysis of situated interactions, the present study aims to illuminate the reciprocal organization of nurturing haptic practices and contribute to the understanding of relational care in ECEC.

Relational perspectives on care, intimacy and control

Care, intimacy and affection are intertwined, interactive and relational practices and experiences (Goodwin and Cekaite 2018; Keane 2016; Noddings 2013). Care and caring-for involve acts that provide a person with what she needs for her wellbeing and health, and are associated with affection and respect. Noddings (2013, xiv) defines caring-for as displays of empathy and sympathy occurring in a ‘set of encounters characterized by direct attention and response’. Caring-for is interactional in that the person being cared for ubiquitously responds to the care and must accept the care if caring is to be effectuated (see also Buber 1953/1993). Caring acts are multifaceted: They can provide emotional support and compassionate soothing/emotion regulation; they can also involve guidance and, especially with young children, embodied and verbal acts of monitoring and control (Cekaite and Holm Kvist 2017; Goodwin and Cekaite 2018).

Within relational approaches to development and care, the affective and sensorial experiences of embodied subjects are viewed as crucial. Intimacy, a significant condition for reciprocity in caring, is cultivated and experienced through repeated instances of social interaction, for instance, when people share or co-create meaning (Weingarten 1991, 386), as well as through sensitive touch practices, in other words, haptic sociality (Goodwin
The sensorial experience of touch implies ‘a creative intertwining of self and other’ and, because of its transformative power to ‘enliven, at the affective level, our sense of self as differentiated from and in relation to others’ (Russon 2014, 67), can create nurturing conditions for young child’s development of individual selves.

**Research on interpersonal touch**

There is a growing number of studies on adult-infant, especially mother-infant, touch, showing the importance of touch for growth, development of attachment, and well-being (Bowlby 1969; Field 2014; Hertenstein and Weiss 2011). Comforting touch is effective in emotion regulation, and in situations of distress, tension and arousal; it helps the recipient’s body relax and changes bodily sensations (Hertenstein et al. 2009). The child then becomes a more attentive, sensitive embodied subject, open to taking in information and engaging in learning. However, the perception of touch is multifaceted: It is based on neurophysiology as well as culture and social relations. Perception and pleasantness of touch depend on ‘more than the afferent sensation alone’ (Cole 2014, 88), and the appropriateness of touch is governed by a set of socioculturally anchored considerations regarding when, how, and what touch conduct is used (Cekaite 2015; Goodwin and Cekaite 2018). In childrearing as well, the appropriateness of embodied acts of caring is sensitive to the socio-emotional values and socialization goals of society. For instance, in the early twentieth century, American psychologist Watson strongly argued against motherly coddling and soothing, because affective touch would cause the child to develop a weak character (Classen 2012).

Research on touch practices and their implications for ECEC is, however, scarce. Several interview studies with preschool personnel in nursery contexts in the U.K. (examining the notion of ‘professional love’) suggest that caring emotional responsiveness and intimacy are common characteristics of the adult-child interaction in nurseries, and that child-minders respond to children’s solicitations of closeness and physical contact (Page and Elfer 2013; Quan-McGimpsey, Kuczynski, and Brophy 2011), although they can simultaneously experience professional and emotional dilemmas. Children themselves can seek intimacy and touch from caregivers, as shown in observational studies of child-initiated touch in ECEC in the U.S. (Cigales et al. 1996; Fleck and Chavajay 2009). Age was a significant factor in the distribution of touches, with younger children more frequently seeking bodily contact with other children and with teachers.

While previous studies largely rely on interview materials, or introspective data, video recordings of daily practices enable a detailed examination of touch practices as lived experiences, and show how participants – adults and young children – respond to and participate in each others’ touch. For instance, video-ethnographic studies on the naturally occurring social interactions and the use of touch in adult-child encounters (in Sweden, Japan, and U.S.) show that caregivers – parents and educators in early childhood education – recurrently and systematically used touch for various communicative and social relational purposes (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Burdelski 2010; Goodwin 2017). One of the most frequent functions of adult-initiated touch in Swedish preschools was mild controlling touch used to lightly monitor, manage and prompt a child’s embodied actions, i.e. to guide the child’s conduct. Haptic control acts were deployed in a mitigated, less intrusive way, thereby demonstrating adults’
concern with the child recipient’s sense of bodily integrity. For instance, light ‘shepherd-ing’ touches – instrumental for steering a child’s locomotion toward a specific activity goal – were used to prompt the child’s accomplishment of everyday tasks (Cekaite 2010; 2015). Adults’ mildly controlling touches were clearly linked to the management and organizational aspects of preschool activities. Studies on touch practices in Swedish preschools show that caregivers recurrently used comforting touch to soothe crying children (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018). Similarly, Lipponnen (2017), in the investigation of the emotional worlds of Finnish kindergartens, reports that educators used touch to show their help and compassion. In Swedish preschools, and families, affectionate features of adult touch were also significant in encounters aimed at controlling and managing various aspects of children’s conduct (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Goodwin and Cekaite 2018). These studies reveal that the relational meanings of touch are achieved in a rich interactional context, and essentially, that touch both reflects and influences the character of social relations.

The present study contributes to the previous research by examining the relational caring aspects of touch in ECEC. It explores in detail affectionate as well as affectionate-controlling touch conduct in adult-child interaction and discusses how embodied care – intimacy, compassion and control - are enacted.

**Method**

**Setting, data, and ethical procedures**

The data consist of 24 hours of video-recorded naturalistic observations of everyday activities in a regular Swedish preschool (located in a middle-class area), involving 9 professionals and 35 children (1–5-year-olds). The preschool was chosen as a result of a formal request to the municipality about the educators’ interest in participating in the study. Following the consent of the parents and the preschool staff, video-recordings were conducted. The data document regular indoor activities such as free play, circle time, cleaning-up, book reading and transitions between the activities. The Regional Ethics Board has approved of the data collection procedure. Verbal and written information on the study was provided in all steps of the data collection procedure. When approaching the children, the researcher who was video-recording (DB) was sensitive to the children’s reactions, and stopped when any child showed signs of discomfort (such as turning, moving away, or making an angry face).

**Analytical procedure**

The study employs a multimodal interactional approach (Goodwin 2000) that inductively examines how embodied social actions are accomplished in social encounters. The analytical focus was on adults’ and children’s touch behavior (type, location, approximate duration, function, and interactional context) and what can be identified as the interactional response to touch, displayed through the participants’ publicly visible actions. Touch can be accepted or rejected: For example, a child recipient may not respond in requested ways, instead moving away, remaining immobile, collapsing on the floor, or physically resisting.
In the initial stage of coding the data, various forms and functions of physical contact were identified. There were 322 adult-initiated touch episodes in total. The categories evolved inductively, during the process of repeated collaborative viewings of the video-recordings. The function, defined as a communicative meaning of touch, was identified depending on the form of touch, social situation and verbalization that accompanied physical conduct. Affectionate touch and Affectionate-controlling touch were two of the most recurrent categories in the data set (for a detailed report on the categorization and frequencies of touch conduct, see Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018). The functions of Affectionate and Affectionate-controlling touches and their subcategories were identified and qualitatively analyzed during repeated viewings of the video-recordings. Affectionate touch was divided into two subcategories: Affectionate-comforting touch, used in response to children’s distress, and Affectionate-amicable touch, used as a spontaneous display of affection. The category of Affectionate-controlling touch involved Sustained affectionate-controlling touch, used to manage the children’s embodied participation in a preschool activity, and Temporally short affectionate-controlling touch, used to direct the children’s attention.

Data analysis shows that Affectionate and Affectionate-controlling touch conduct was initiated by preschool teachers during a broad range of preschool activities, such as Book reading, Cleaning Up, Circle time, and Transitions (when children need to move from one activity and activity space to another, see Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018) and Free play.

Findings

In the following, we will demonstrate recurrent social functions and forms of Affectionate and Affectionate-controlling touches (including their subcategories), and the situations in which they occurred. We will show that educators used a broad repertoire of touch forms – embraces, strokes, rubs – for affectionate relational purposes and we will attend to children’s responses as well as their initiations of adults’ touch. Anonymized visual examples of representative instances are presented.

Affectionate touch

In this section, we will describe in detail Affectionate – comforting and amicable – touch conduct and discuss how it was co-constitutive of intimacy, compassion, and caring practices between the educators and the children.

Affectionate – comforting touch

Affectionate-comforting touch was used by the adults during frequent soothing practices that occurred in response to a child’s crying and distress. In Swedish early childhood education, children being in distress – crying or complaining – is a deviation from the institutional requirements and alleviating the child’s distress (regardless of the child’s age or gender) is an integral part of the educators’ responsibilities. Such soothing practices were differently organized and involved various degrees of physical contact (e.g. Cekaite and Holm Kvist 2017). Recurrently, emotion regulation of children’s distress was accomplished using temporally sustained embraces – active, mutually responsive and intimate, intercorporeal acts of compassion. In Figure 1, a 2-year-old child falls and hurts
himself, and then starts crying. The teacher immediately responds to the child’s distress and scoops up the boy in her arms.

The teacher consoles (shows her compassion with) the boy with talk and an embrace that envelopes the child, who is experiencing pain and distress, in a close and supportive bodily contact. By using embrace, the adult also diverts the boy’s gaze from the others and creates an intercorporeal hub for the child’s immersion in and experience of soothing and crying (Cekaite and Holm Kvist 2017). The boy leans toward the teacher, accepts her embrace and bodily accommodates the adult’s soothing touch, and the educator and the boy together establish and sustain an intimate caring interaction. Comforting touch thereby allows adult-child co-experience of ‘compresense’, i.e. ‘a single intercorporeality’ when we intertwine with other bodies and embody the other while the other simultaneously embodies us (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 168). In a situation of comforting distress, compassionate touch blurs the boundaries between individuals who, instead, share corporeal experiences and actions with others.

Soothing embraces and strokes were employed not only in response to children’s injury and physical pain, but were also used as caring embodied initiatives and responses to children being upset because of disagreements in the peer group. In Ex. 2, Alma (3.5 y.) starts crying because of a conflict with her peers. The teacher responds by using a trajectory of soothing embodied and verbal acts to alleviate the child’s distress, explain the situation and then re-engage the child into play. Initially, she lightly taps the child’s foot, but the girl is still upset, and the teacher uses more intimate touch

Figure 1. Comforting embrace.
that intensifies corporeal features of her soothing: She scoops the girl up and embraces her (Figure 2).

Similarly to Figure 1, the teacher’s embrace establishes close bodily togetherness while the girl sits on the teacher’s lap and the girl reciprocates by leaning toward the teacher. The teacher also embellishes soothing with compassionate talk (soothing in mild voice) and other affectionate touches, such as strokes, as well as close contact between the caregiver and child’s faces. Together they sustain a close affectionate positioning, acting as embodied, co-experiencing subjects. Soothing is protracted and lasts until the girl is ready to engage in peer play again.

The educators also responded to the children’s moderate experiences of pain (stomach ache, hurting one’s hand and similar) using strokes, taps, and rubs. These forms of touch did not involve as extensive an adult-child body contact surface as the soothing embraces did. Rather, they created a multisensory soothing experience, demonstrating the adults’ caring, heightened affectionate attention, and compassion with the child’s pain and distress.

In Ex. 3, when Cathie (3 y.) complains that she has stomach pain, the adult comforts her with talk and a stroke on her head (Figure 3).

By using affectionate strokes on the head, the adult demonstrates her orientation to the child’s experiences, and attentively acknowledges the child’s mild distress.

More intimate embodied caring demonstrations of soothing touch, such as kisses, were also, albeit rarely, used in preschool interactions. In Ex. 4, Bridget (2.5 y.) hurts her arm, approaches the teacher with a complaint, and points at the place of the hurt (Figure 4).

The teacher responds to the girl by examining the place of injury. She also kisses the injured place lightly. Kiss is used as an intimate act of compassion that targets a particular – injured – place and soothes the child by engaging in a symbolic act of alleviating pain.

As demonstrated in this section, by using touch and comforting talk, the educators engaged in a complex task of soothing hurt and demonstrating affectionate caring attention for the child’s accident and emotional state of distress. In this way, the teachers (and parents, as documented in studies of families, Goodwin and Cekaite 2018) use diagnostic and comforting touch and talk as emotionally attuned and reciprocated practices of intimate caring and compassion.

Figure 2. Soothing embrace and strokes.
In the preschool, Affectionate-amicable touches – hugs, strokes, taps – were used by the educators spontaneously to show affection towards the child, and to invite the child’s reciprocation of closeness. In daily preschool activities, sitting in the adult’s lap, hugs and half-embraces (various temporally sustained affectionate touches) were recurrently used by the educators in arranging a ‘casual’, physically close, way of spending enjoyable and pleasurable time together. In Figure 5, the bodily contact is initiated by a 5-year-old girl who, when the teacher suggests playing with a puzzle, sits in the adult’s lap. By holding the child in her lap, the adult not only provides bodily support to the child, but is also doing affectionate relational work.

The girl stays in the adult’s lap for a considerable amount of time while they play table games and joke with each other. Throughout this encounter, the teacher’s affectionate relational work is reciprocated by the child who on numerous occasions enhances the closeness of the bodily contact by leaning towards and stroking the adult. They both align in a positive interactional mode, smiling and laughing together and willingly and effortlessly adjust to each other’s bodily contact interface. Interestingly, when the teacher has to leave, and another adult joins the activity, she not only takes her colleagues seat, but also continues her affectionate touch, holding the girl in her lap.

Figure 6 demonstrates yet another type of affectionate-amicable touch, the educator’s spontaneous hug.
During a circle time, when the children are sitting on the floor and singing, one of the educators gives a spontaneous hug as she sits down close to one of the children (a 2.5-year-old girl). The teacher’s hug is reciprocated by the child, who leans toward her. By initiating this contact, the educator acknowledges the child’s presence, re-establishes the intimate quality of their relations, and in this way sustains their close and warm time together.

Educators’ short affectionate touches—taps and strokes—were recurrent throughout the children’s time in the preschool. In contrast to temporally sustained, bodily enveloping forms of amicable affectionate touch, they were brief. The educators lightly stroked the children in a variety of situations, for instance, during fleeting moments of contact as the adult was passing by the child. Light strokes were also used as an affectionate rewarding act that was coordinated with the adult’s positive comment about the child’s actions.

In Figure 7, the caregiver, as she passes by a group of toddlers several times, lightly strokes several of them on the head. With such light touch, she signals her attention and acknowledges the children’s bodily co-presence, thereby spontaneously showing her affection.

The educators also used playful, tickling, short taps and strokes to solicit and encourage the child’s playful mode. In Figure 8, a very young child (1.3 y.) does not participate in the
‘dancing and singing’ activity of the older (2–3 y. old) children. He stands looking bewildered, and the teacher, upon observing that, smiles, strokes, and tickles him.

The teacher’s playful touch invites him to join the cheerful mood of the children’s group activity, and the child smiles back. By soliciting the boy’s positive response, the educator shows her care and compassion by including him in and aligning him with the participation of the older children. Playful haptic contact works to provide participation possibilities and positive emotional experiences for a younger and thus far, less competent, child.

**Affectionate-controlling touch**

Educators’ Affectionate-controlling touch conduct was recurrent in daily practices at the preschool, when the children’s conduct was not in accordance with the expectations of the preschool activity: Various forms of touches, such as half-embraces and strokes, were used to mildly control and direct the child’s bodily conduct, attention and participation toward educational activities, or to mitigate the adults’ disciplining talk by overlaying it with affectionate touch. The acts of caring, helping, disciplining (while showing compassion) were interweaved and were complemented with teachers’ talk.
Sustained affectionate-controlling touches

The educators used temporally sustained, light controlling touches – embraces and half-embraces – to mildly monitor the child’s bodily conduct during preschool activities that required the child’s attentive bodily participation, e.g. sitting quietly and listening to book reading. These forms of touch are conventionally associated with positive affect (Figures 1 and 2), and the adults used half-embraces to bodily monitor the children’s motility, while still engaging in close caring bodily contact.

In Figure 9, during book reading, the teacher and children are seated in a sofa. One boy becomes distracted and the teacher uses a half-embrace to engage him in the book reading. Here, touch is a bi-directional resource that, through bodily co-perception, accomplishes both embodied control and intimacy.

The child responds to the adult’s half-embrace by partly starting to pay more attention to the book conversation, but his attention is perfunctory and he disengages from the activity several times, looking away. The educator’s half-embrace is acted upon and responded to by the child – it is not rejected, but it is not ‘properly’ reciprocated because the child remains mobile, continuously shifting his focus of attention. Throughout the book reading, the teacher continues to respond to the child’s movements by adapting and transforming her light embrace, and embellishing it with multiple affectionate strokes. These affectionate strokes allow to her mitigate mild bodily control, exercised through half-embrace.

In situations, that were potentially dangerous for the child, sustained touch provided a way of protecting and controlling the young child’s actions in an affectionate manner. As demonstrated in Figure 10, during snack time, the teacher repeatedly tells Cathie (3 y.), who is eating an apple, to stop moving and laughing. Because the child could choke, when the girl does not comply, the educator scoops the girl up and removes her from the distracting peer group.

The adult then embodies her care by arranging the child’s sitting position on her lap. Sitting on the adult’s lap forms affectionate, close adult-child bodily contact, and it also implicitly controls the child’s movements and bodily conduct. While earlier the girl disobeyed the teacher’s verbal instructions, she now complies with the affectionate embrace, smiles leaning close to the teacher; the girl behaves according to the requirements of the activity, eating fruit quietly and safely.
**Temporally short affectionate-controlling touches**

Yet another function of educators’ affectionate-controlling touches was to draw the child’s attention to the adult’s mild verbal disciplining. The adults used short strokes, taps or grooming when bringing to the children’s attention their minor transgressions, for instance, disciplining a child who was talking out of turn during circle time, or otherwise behaving inappropriately. During circle time (Figure 11), a 4-year-old boy interrupts...
another child who is answering the teacher’s questions. The teacher then addresses the boy with a mild verbal reproach.

During her disciplining comment, the educator grooms the child’s hair, while looking at him. In response, the child stops talking. Here, touch contact marks, in an embodied manner, the salience of the adult’s mildly disciplining address: The directive is aimed at a particular child, rather than to a general audience. Simultaneously, the teacher’s affectionate grooming touch can be seen as a compassionate act that helps to sustain the ambient atmosphere during her simultaneous delivery of verbal disciplining.

The educators’ short affectionate touch, e.g. strokes or taps were also used to mitigate the disciplining character of the encounter and to end the disciplining situation with a positive affect. For instance, (Figure 12), a 4-year-old boy disturbs the ongoing play by pulling down a cardboard castle. The teacher intervenes by telling him to stop, while she ‘shepherds’ him to repair the ‘castle’, by holding him lightly and steering his movements.

The teacher tells him to repair the construction and completes the disciplining situation with an affectionate stroke on the child’s forearm, and belly combining it with soft voice. We can thus see a lamination of control and affection: the educators’ verbal disciplining and controlling touch are used in response to the child’s inappropriate action. They are transformed into affectionate strokes that mitigate the initial verbal and mild embodied disciplining.

In all, the teachers’ affectionate-controlling touches were instrumental in sustaining positive relations in potentially challenging situations. The educators’ embodied conduct was relationally multifaceted: It controlled and monitored the children’s bodily conduct and simultaneously demonstrated the educators’ care, affection and compassion with the child.

**Conclusions**

The present study has examined affectionate and affectionate-controlling touch, as embodied practices of relational care, spontaneously occurring in everyday adult-child interactions in a Swedish preschool. The educators used affectionate touches in various ways
and in different social situations (engaging in situated practices of intimacy and compassion). Adults’ comforting touch was used for emotion regulation as a response to children’s distress, crying, and pain. Educators’ amicable touch (hugs, strokes) was deployed spontaneously, or in response to the child’s solicitation of intimacy, and it engaged the child in acts of haptic affection and closeness. Affectionate touches served as embodied resources in sustaining close and intimate caring social relations and ethics of compassion between children and adults as embodied subjects.

Affectionate-controlling touch was recurrently used in organizing the daily life of a preschool, and was instrumental in sustaining positive relations in potentially challenging situations. It was oriented to the child’s inattentiveness and inappropriate participation in preschool activities. The educators recurrently used it in situations of light misconduct in order to mitigate their verbal disciplining or to lightly control and guide the child’s embodied conduct. They exploited the affordances for care provided by a convergence of disciplining, control and positive affect. The affectionate-controlling touch contributed to sustaining a trusting and compassionate adult-child relationship during disciplining situations, which could be associated with negative emotions such as anger, sadness, or guilt.

Children themselves also initiated physical closeness with the educators, soliciting educators’ care and touch (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Fleck and Chavajay 2009). They approached adults and, by spending time in their proximity, established numerous possibilities for engaging in bodily contact. The educators’ affectionate touches were mostly reciprocated, and the children physically aligned with the adults’ touch.

Methodologically, we argue that analysis of how children and adults participate in and experience touch can be successfully carried out by using a detailed multimodal interactional approach based on video-recordings that capture everyday interactions. The study shows in detail how affectionate and affectionate-controlling touch practices contributed to embodied intimacy sensitive caring. Theoretically, by attending to the notions of intercorporeality, embodied subjectivity, and the sensorial duality of the ‘sentient-sensible’ body (Merleau-Ponty 1964), we have highlighted the multidirectional affective and communicative potentials of adult-initiated touch. In caring touch encounters, the adult demonstrates her affection for the child, feels the child’s body and bodily response, in this way experiencing affective intimacy and closeness. The multidirectional-ity of sensorial experiences can be seen as an embodied manifestation of intimacy in relational care. Touch thereby transforms the toucher and the person being touched. Recurrent touch practices suggest that intimacy and care are more than a momentary connection, but are possible and enable sustained, temporally enduring relationships (Hundeide 2007; Noddings 2013; Weingarten 1991). It is also important to recognize that affectionate touch conduct may also exert some (albeit veiled) control over the child’s body. Affectionate touch can serve as an act of care aimed at regulating and mildly, non-coercively controlling the child’s conduct (Cekaite and Holm Kvist 2017).

As demonstrated, in preschool practices, intimacy and deference to the bodily integrity of the young child matter in providing embodied care, because touch, especially affectionate touch, derives its positive value from being used in social relations that are built on trust. It is in such close relations that affectionate-controlling touch can be employed to handle challenging conflict situations and to guide children’s inattentive (or otherwise inappropriate) behavior. Touch conduct is used in relational caring work as an efficient resource for responding to participants’ emotional requirements and needs.
Implications

The study, by identifying episodes of haptic interaction in the daily practices of early childhood education, empirically supports a holistic view on relational care. We suggest that reciprocal interpersonal touch constitutes a foundational form of affective interpersonal intimacy that is an important condition for children’s socioemotional development, sense of trust, and that facilitates children’s participation in everyday practices and education. The study also attests the emotional complexity of early childhood care and education, and shows how caring and ‘professional love’ (Bateman 2015; Page, 2008; Page and Elfer 2013) and cultures of compassion (Lipponen 2017) are enacted and experienced by educators and children through reciprocal intercorporeal practices. The study supports the policy makers’ claim that relational care and intimacy are and should be integrated into educational settings (Läroplan för förskolan 1998/2016), contrary to ideas that connect professionalism with emotional distance, lack of physical contact, and the predominance of didactic encounters.

Note

1. The study is part of a research program looking at children’s moral and emotional socialization in Swedish ECEC.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Financial support from the Swedish Research Council is gratefully acknowledged.

References