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Children's touch in a Swedish preschool: touch cultures in peer group interaction

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ABSTRACT

This study examines children's touch conduct in peer-group interaction in a Swedish preschool. Through a detailed analysis of 100 video-recorded touch episodes from everyday preschool activities, the study proposes an initial description of touch functions in children's peer groups. The results suggest that touch was primarily used to control other children and to show affection. Both affectionate and control touch played significant roles to form and protect small social units within the larger group of children. Affectionate touch also played a central role in children's friendship groups to establish and uphold intimate social relations. Children's peer relations involved extended forms of touch between both boys and girls, and in mixed gender constellations. Children both initiated and received peer touch without paying these actions specific attention, and they granted others access to their whole bodies including vulnerable body parts. Children's touch regularly occurred in parallel with other activities and was routinely not verbally topicalised as focal point of interaction. Detailed examination of touch episodes provides well-informed ground for understanding specificities of embodied conduct as socially and normatively organised children's touch cultures.

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Introduction

In the present study, we examine children's peer group touch in a Swedish preschool context. Touch is central to human social life and constitutes a powerful communicative social mode through which individuals form attachments and alliances, negotiate status differences, soothe and calm (Hertenstein and Weiss 2011). Touch is prevalent in young children's lives in the socio-material space of early childhood institutions, where children spend time with educators and a large number of peers (e.g. Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Cigales et al. 1996; Ben-Ari 2013). However, research on touch in institutional settings has so far mainly focused on intergenerational adult-child touch and is largely conducted through interviews with educators concerning their notions of appropriate educator-child touch, and there is an on-going discussion about children's bodily integrity, with

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the appropriateness of educator touch being called into question (e.g. Fletcher 2013; Öhman and Quennerstedt, 2017). Varying cultural preferences and concerns influence why, how and to what extent teachers touch children. In New Zealand, for example, teachers' anxieties with accusation of inappropriate touch make teacher-to-child touch a problematic area, while in Japan, teachers' touch in preschool activities is viewed not only as desirable but also as necessary for children development of certain skills (Burke and Duncan 2016). Thus far, a limited number of observation-based studies of intergenerational touch involving young children in early childhood education demonstrate that touch has multiple social functions and that educators both initiate touch and respond to children's invitations to bodily proximity and physical touch (see Fleck and Chavajay 2009; Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Cekaite and Bergnehr 2018; Svinth 2018).

Multiple ways of interacting contribute to forming early childhood educational institutions as embodied socio-material spaces that shape children's everyday social and emotional experiences and learning. In the way that children are socialised into linguistic practices (Burdelski 2010), they similarly need to learn embodied ways of being and acting in the world (Ben-Ari 2013; Kern 2018). While educators play an important role in children's socialisation, peers are also crucial for children's learning and development (Rubin, Bukowski, and Bowker 2015). However, despite the fact that children's peer group provides a large proportion of the experiences that children encounter in early childhood institutions, little is known about how touch features as a social and communicative resource in the peer group.

The present observational study examines touch in children's peer interactions in a regular Swedish preschool for children aged 1–5 years. We use video-recordings of ordinary, everyday activities to explore the use of touch and its social functions in children's peer groups. Video-observational data offer a unique possibility to explore children's everyday social worlds by documenting real-time peer-group activities (Bateman 2016). Using a multimodal interaction analytical framework of social touch proposed by Cekaite and Mondada (2021), the study directs attention to communicative meanings (i.e. social interactional functions) of touch in peer-group interaction among children in a Swedish preschool. It will contribute to growing research on *children's embodied habitus and touch cultures* (e.g. Cekaite 2015; see also Crossley 1995), i.e. children's tangible, culturally and normatively structured, ways of acting in the socio-material world. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of how children orient towards each other as embodied beings that have agency, motives and emotions as well as material, observable and touchable properties (Cekaite and Mondada 2021).

Research on intergenerational touch in educational settings

Previous research shows that interpersonal touch is a ubiquitous part of human communicative and emotional experiences (Burgoon et al. 1996). Touch indicates relational aspects to others and signifies the level of intimacy. For example, through *tie-signs* or *with-markers* that involve body contact such as grooming, stroking, patting or holding hands, people can effectively communicate to others around them what kind of relationship – intimate, friendly, formal, distant – they have to each (Goffman 1972; Morris 1977). Touch has positive effects on psychological and physiological well-being, social

solidarity, as well as an individual's self-confidence (see Hertenstein and Weiss 2011), including children's development and well-being.

Notably, recent research on children and caregivers has extended the empirical scope to include children beyond infancy in formal settings. Educators in interview studies report various ways in which their touch contributes to shaping children's developmental and relational context (Svinth 2018). The video-observational studies from everyday practices in families and in early childhood settings have revealed the multiple social functions of touch in adult-child interactions. They show that various mild forms of touch are used for control (management of the recipient's bodily conduct), affection, assisting and instruction (Goodwin and Cekaite 2018; Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Kern 2018; Holm Kvist 2018). Social interactional analysis shows that touch practices are systematically organised: the uses of touch are governed by socio-cultural norms regarding when, how and what physical contact is relevant and appropriate. Notably, the most frequent types of intergenerational physical contact in preschool settings involved educators' controlling and affectionate touch (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018). Controlling touch was mild, and it was deployed by educators to engage children in relevant courses of action that were part of the institutional practice, such as initiating a child's transition to another activity, soliciting the child's attention and participation, or carrying and caring for a toddler. Educators frequently used affectionate touch, i.e. embraces and stroking (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Cekaite and Kvist Holm 2017; Holm Kvist 2018). Intergenerational affectionate touch practices contributed to positive emotions, intimacy and togetherness. Full body embraces as well as strokes were especially frequent in soothing situations, when children expressed upset and were crying. Caretaking touch was used for assisting with routine hygiene or clothing, especially with younger children.

Interestingly, adults' touch conduct usually involved multiple bodily modalities, i.e. touch was preceded by or combined with talk that introduced or contextualised the upcoming/on-going action. In such ways, the communicative purposes of touch were clarified to the recipient of the touch (e.g. 'come on, we're going to lunch'). These studies suggest that educators thereby demonstrated their orientation towards the child as an independent embodied subject who had the right and possibility to respond to educators' touch in various ways, in that they were informed about the communicative purposes of the physical contact.

Children' peer touch in early childhood settings

Young children's use and experiences of touch have been explored only in a handful of observational quantitative studies in early childhood educational settings in the USA (Field et al. 1994; Cigales et al. 1996; Fleck and Chavajay 2009). They suggest that children's touch conduct differs from that of adults, and that it changes over time. For instance, Fleck and Chavajay (2009) examined communicative and incidental touch among three groups: infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and responses their touch actions received from peers, and educators. Children's touch behaviour – frequency and location of touch – differed with age; younger children used and received more touch (both from peers, and educators). Toddlers used and received a considerable amount of affectionate touch, compared to preschoolers, and they demonstrated

significantly more touching of ‘vulnerable body parts’. Touch was more often used for communicative purposes among the older children (compared to rather recurrent incidental touch between toddlers and preschoolers), and at the age of 4 children are suggested to have adopted a more adult-like touch behaviour (Cigales et al. 1996).

Research also shows that young children’s touch varied in frequency and function in relation to context of the activity in which it was used. For instance, touch was more frequent between children during play and large group activities compared to mealtimes and activities in smaller groups (Twardosz et al. 1987). During play, boys engaged in touch and physical contact more frequently than girls, and touch was also used in situations of aggression. This type of physical contact between children decreased with age (Field et al. 1994).

These observations from earlier research suggest that children in the peer groups may have specific peer cultures of physical contact, i.e. touch cultures. Early childhood institutions constitute rich environments for the development of peer cultures, conceptualised as a set of child-specific cultural practices (Corsaro 2005; Goodwin 2006). Here, children interact with a large number of peers and the socio-material environment of the institution creates specific conditions – opportunities and constraints – for children’s peer group interactions, social relations and physical contact. In order to better understand the social and developmental potentials young children encounter in institutional contexts of early childhood education, it is relevant to outline young children’s own proximity-seeking behaviours and ways of engaging in touch interactions.

Method

Early childhood education in Sweden

Preschools are the main early childhood educational institution in Sweden and are attended by 84% of children between the ages of one and five (Skolverket 2013). They have a dual focus that combines day-care and educational activities, as well as free play. Children are usually divided in age-based groups for 1–3 y. olds and 3–5 year olds, but they also often spend considerable amount time in age-integrated groups for 1–5 year olds, for example, during play or mealtimes. Usually, a preschool day consists of educational, teacher-organised, activities, and free play. Free play, i.e. non-instructed playtime where the children organise their play more or less independently of the educators, constitutes a significant portion of preschool time regardless of the children’s age.

Data, participants and setting

The study was conducted in a regular public Swedish preschool for children aged 1–5. The data consist of 10 h of video-recordings conducted during a period of 6 months.¹ It features 35 children: 19 girls and 16 boys. The recordings documented activities that were part of the regular preschool day. They included free play when the children in the peer group were able to choose with whom and what to play (5.5 h), and teacher-led activities (educational activities such as book reading, circle time and mealtimes) (4.5 h). The data were collected as part of a larger research project² for the purpose of investigating children’s emotional and moral socialisation in early childhood education.

Instances of touch were identified in the data collection upon subsequent viewing of video-recordings. The researcher conducting the recordings had an ethnographic relation to the children: she interacted with them on occasions when she was approached but otherwise took a passive stance and did not take on institutional responsibilities associated with educators. The children soon (after 1 or 2 days) differentiated between the researcher and educators and did not approach her for assistance or in play.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted after ethical vetting by a regional ethical review committee.³ Staff and parents were given both written and oral information, and those who wished to participate in the project signed a consent form (for parents, this consent also included their children). During the data collection, the researcher informed the children about the project and data collection procedure, and she frequently asked the children's permission before recording activities and was also attentive to any signs from the children that they felt uncomfortable about video-recordings. Detailed information about the participants is not represented in the study in order to minimise the risk of individual participants being identifiable. Sketches used for illustrative purposes are anonymised.

Analytical approach

The analysis started by repeatedly viewing the video-data and logging all situations when children physically interacted with each other by touching another child, that is any form of body-to-body contact between individuals (Fleck and Chavajay 2009, p. 49). Physical interaction between children was a ubiquitous part of preschool activities, and, therefore, a distinction between purposeful and incidental touches was made. Incidental physical contact was defined as when 'a person appears to accidentally, inadvertently or unintentionally touch another person without any particular clear meaning or inherent purpose' (Fleck and Chavajay 2009, 50) was excluded from the collection of children's touches.

The initial analysis resulted in a collection of 100 touch episodes in which two or more children engaged physically with each other in a non-incidental way. When children engaged in non-incidental physical contact, they usually touched each other repeatedly during a short period of time. Therefore, the collection consists of touch episodes rather than individual touch instances. A touch episode consists of one or several instances of touches, i.e. a touch trajectory that occurred as part of a specific social activity accomplished within a limited time frame.

The touch episodes were categorised according to their functions, i.e. their communicative and social meaning. The functions of touch were interpreted on the basis of the form of touch, its situational context, the overarching activity and sometimes additional verbalisation that accompanied the physical contact. In line with multimodal interaction analytical approach for studying touch in social interaction (Cekaite and Mondada 2021), the temporal and sequential position of the touches in the on-going interaction, i.e. the kind of actions (both verbal and embodied) that preceded the touch as well as the kind of responses it received, were used to interpret the communicative meaning of touch conduct. In addition, the persons involved and the preschool practice were noted for each episode. The categorisation of touch episodes was inspired by previous studies on

haptic contact between children and adults (e.g. Fleck and Chavajay 2009; Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018), but were adapted to the current focus on child–child interaction. It is important to note that the boundaries between the different touch categories are not definite, and the functions of touch sometimes overlap. The analytical process was supported by repeated discussions within a research group.

Considerations about video-data in the study of touch

Video-observational methods in the study of touch differ from such methods as self-reporting and experimental studies. Touch behaviours can be more accurately described by analysing video-recording because subjects do not always have access to the intricate details of their conduct. This type of data and analytical approach is especially useful in that touch conduct solicits the recipient’s embodied responses, and the responses reveal their uptake, alignment and emotional attitude (Goodwin and Cekaite 2018). Since audio-visual recordings capture both vocal and embodied conduct, they allow the repeated viewing of data and identification of details: how touch actions are used, when they are introduced, and how they work together with other communicative resources in social interaction. The possibility to repeatedly view recordings of touch episodes compared to the participants’ observations and post hoc descriptions, facilitates a more detailed understanding of how touch features in the organisation of social actions and the ways multiple resources are combined to achieve communicative meaning (Cekaite and Mondada 2021). Notably, although video-observational data provide detailed access to the children’s mutual participation, their acceptance or rejection of others’ touch conduct, it does not enable analysts to gain access to individual sensorial experiences of touch. Notably, the present findings are based on video data recorded in one preschool during a 6-month timeframe and they are, therefore, not necessarily transferable to other contexts.

Results

The analyses of the 100 touch episodes resulted in 5 categories of touch that describe the functions of non-incident child–child touch: (i) controlling; (ii) affectionate; (iii) touches in play; (iv) assistive; and (v) ‘body-object’ touch (Table 1).

Notably, most children’s peer touch instances were found in children’s free play activities. Such distribution can be related to the socio-material organisation and requirements as well as possibilities for children’s participation in the preschool practices (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018). The children primarily used touch actions to *control other children’s bodies* (e.g. steer and manage a peer’s bodily actions) in various ways (38 episodes), and to *express affection towards a peer* (26 episodes). Touch was frequently found in children’s play

Table 1 Touch actions in child–child interactions (age 1–5): functions and frequency.

Type of touch	Control		Affection		Play		Assistive		'Body-object'		Total	
No of episodes	38		26		21		8		7		100	
Activity type (Free play/ Teacher-organised)	28	10	13	13	17	4	7	1	5	2	70	30

activities (*rough-and-tumble and chasing games*) (21 episodes). Assistive touches, when children *helped out or physically supported each other*, were not common (8 episodes). Touch when children *touch other children's bodies in an object-like manner* (e.g. when a child climbed over another child's body to get somewhere or leaned on the other as support when standing up and these touches were intentional, but did not have a specific communicative purpose) were also used, but were not common (7 episodes).

Touch instances were also categorised in relation to the children's gender. Touch contact was common among both boys and girls, including mixed (girl and boy) constellations (Table 2).

Both girls and boys used touch for various purposes. Control touches were more common in gender-mixed interactions. This can partly be explained by specific individuals' touch conduct (e.g. an older girl lifted/carried a younger boy). Out of 100 touch episodes analysed in the present study, only few touch episodes (4) were found in toddler peer constellations (between children younger than 2 years). Most of the touch contact occurred between children beyond toddler age (2–5 y.) (63 episodes) and between older children and toddlers (33 episodes). Both affectionate touch and control touch were common between older children and toddlers. These touches were predominantly initiated by the older child. In the next section, we will describe the functions of touch found in peer interaction.

Control touches

Control touches (most common type of touches, 38 episodes) were used to control and direct another child's bodily movements and position, bodily conduct and attention. They included physically strong actions such as holding, pushing and lifting/carrying (usually a younger a child). They also involved subtle touches such as tapping or 'shepherding' by mildly steering the recipient's movement (Cekaite 2010). Controlling touches were used by both girls and boys and were most frequent during children's free play (28 episodes). Such physical contact was common in play conflicts (11 episodes out of 28), here defined as situations where participants had opposing objectives and expressed negative emotions. In these situations, touch contact was not aggressive or violent; children did not hit or hurt each other, rather, they used pushes, shoves or firm grabbing of play objects/toys from each other.

Touch played an important part in the peer group activities as the children claimed, protected and negotiated the organisation of play space and the distribution of material objects. Children primarily used controlling touches to organise the material context of their activities, both regarding toys and other play objects, as well as their peers' positioning and movement in the preschool space. The spatial placement impacted peer activities

Table 2 Distribution of touch in relation to gender constellations (age 1–5).

Type of touch	Girls	Boys	Girls-Boys	Total
Affectionate	10	7	9	26
Control	10	11	17	38
Assistive	4	2	2	8
Play	4	13	4	21
'Body-object'	0	5	2	7
All functions	28	38	34	100

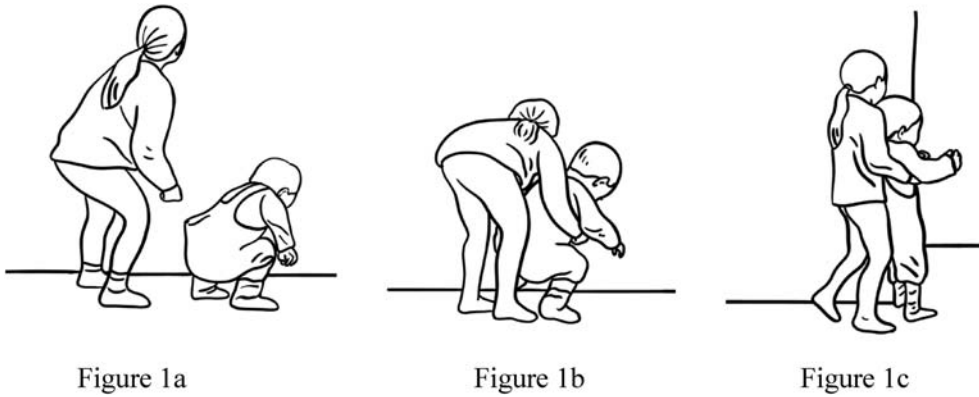


Figure 1 (a–c). Control touch by an older child (age 4) to reposition a younger child (age 1).

because children's access to material objects and physical space was governed by the pre-school rules (e.g. sharing or distributing toys, play space). Control touches were frequently used: (i) to alter another child's spatial positioning (e.g. move the child to sit somewhere else or to direct the child's movement) (Figures 1–3), or (ii) to gain access to and possession of a material object (e.g. a toy or a tool) (Figures 4 and 5). They were usually accepted by the recipient child, and only some instances of rejections were found.

Controlling – moving – others' bodies

Controlling touch contact was frequently used to relocate a younger child by lifting or carrying the child to another place. These actions controlled the other child's body in a strong way and altered the *socio-material configurations* – i.e. the placement and positioning of the children – by physically moving the peer group member. These actions affected both the children's spatial location and the social organisation of the peer group. In Figure 1(a–c), an older child (age 4) moves a younger child (age 1) to a new place in the room.

This kind of touch conduct was used both in free play, and in transitions and preparation for teacher-organised activities (e.g. circle time or book reading) that required

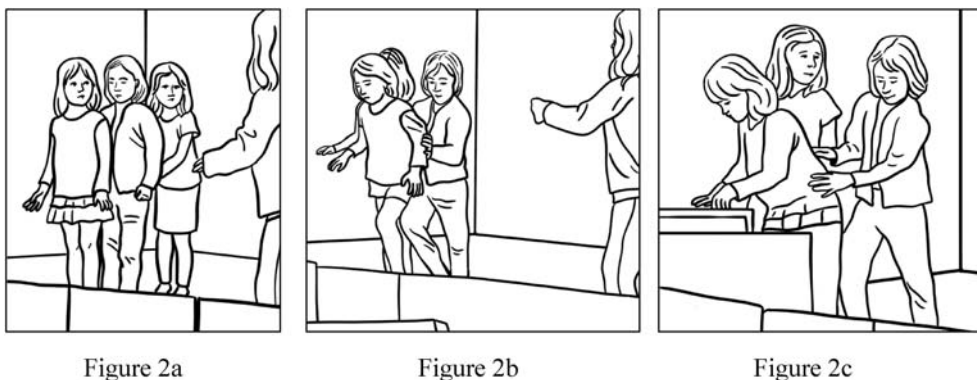


Figure 2 (a–c). Control touch to initiate recipient's movement.



Figure 3. Control touch used to protect play space.

children's specific position in preschool rooms. These touches were mainly used without accompanying talk that could have introduced the reasons for physical contact (cf. Cekaite 2015). However, its meaning could, in some cases, be interpreted from the situational context (e.g. the activity announced by the educator).



Figure 4. Accepted control touch to gain access to objects.



Figure 5a



Figure 5b



Figure 5c



Figure 5d

Figure 5 (a–d). Rejected physical attempt to gain access to an object.

Children also used gentle touch to alter the positioning of a peer. These touches did not physically control the body of the other child, but were rather used to initiate and guide the peer's movement. Similarly, gentle controlling touch was often used without accompanying talk that could have clarified what was expected by the recipient of touch. The communicative meaning was instead interpretable from the context of the activity (e.g. what movements were relevant for play). [Figure 2](#) shows four girls (4–5 years old) taking turns in running through a maze, while one of them is chasing the others.

The chaser on the right approaches the girls who are positioned in a line at the entry to the maze ([Figure 2\(a\)](#)), and the two girls standing last in the line use their hands in a shepherding way (Cekaite 2010) to initiate a collective move through the maze ([Figure 2\(b,c\)](#)).

Controlling space and objects

Children often needed to claim and negotiate their right to a specific play space, and they used control touches to protect their personal sphere, or territory. For instance, during play conflicts or teacher-organised activities, children used physical means to re-locate the opponent in another spatial position, if they disagreed about who had the right to a specific spatial area (e.g. where to sit during circle time or play). Such control touches were usually accompanied by verbal complaints that helped to secure a specific spatial area. In [Figure 3](#), two boys (age 3) play side by side, when one of them pushes on the peer's torso and in such a way uses his hand to protect his play space. Simultaneously he states: 'You should get out'.

The boy's talk, together with physical actions and body posture, works as an effective means that allows him to defend his play area. His touch actions embellish and secure his demand, which he states verbally, namely that his peer should leave the play area. The boy's touch actions control the other child's body in a strong way because they manually prevent him from moving into the play space and they reposition him by physically pushing him away.

Children used touch to gain access to toys by grabbing and holding onto other children's hands, arms or other body parts, while they took hold of the object. Such embodied actions were usually accompanied by verbal declarations about the child's right to use the object that informed the recipient about the meaning and the rightfulness of

the child's physical action (but there were also cases when such verbalisations were not offered).

Figure 4 shows a situation when during a peer drawing activity between boys (3–4 years), one boy takes hold of another boy's wrist with both hands to get a pencil he needs for drawing.

The boy justifies his touch action with a verbal explanation, stating his 'ownership rights': he was using the pencil first; therefore, he is entitled to take it (Holm Kvist 2018; Kultti and Pramling 2015). This physical action is readily accepted by the peer; the boy does not disagree, and smilingly continues drawing (Figure 4).

However, there were also cases when children used touch action to gain access to objects against the other's will and such situations could evolve into peer conflict. In these instances, touch was characterised by more physical strength, it exerted more bodily control and it commonly received peer's resistance. Figure 5(a–d) shows two girls (2.5 years old) playing side by side, when one girl tries to take a toy car from the other.

The girl uses both hands to grab the arm of the child who holds a toy. When she encounters physical resistance (Figure 5(b)), the girl upgrades her physical attempt: she uses one hand to control the other child's hand and arm and grabs the toy with the other (Figure 5(d)). In this case, there is no verbal account for the unexpected interfering physical act and the resistant child shows her dislike with an unhappy facial expression and whining (Figure 5(c–d)).

Affectionate touches

Affectionate touches were frequently used in the children's peer group (26 instances) to show appreciation, liking and togetherness, as well as to comfort. Children used stroking, patting and embraces, held hands, held someone in their lap and leaned on each other. Affectionate touches were commonly used and received by both boys and girls of all ages during free play and teacher-organised activities. They were usually accepted by the receiving party (only three instances were rejected).

Affectionate touches formed an integral part of children's social interactions and a social framework of closeness and embodied intimacy. As preschool groups usually consisted of 15–20 children, children routinely established smaller social units. Various forms of touch were used as 'tie-signs' (Goffman 1972) that showed and supported social bonds and togetherness between specific peers who formed smaller – dyadic or triadic – social constellations within the larger group. Children recurrently arranged themselves in close physical bodily configurations that provided for co-experience of intimacy and togetherness between them.

Frequently, affectionate touches were used simultaneously when the children were playing with each other or listening to the educator. For instance, in Figure 6(a) two boys, close friends, are embracing each other during time for free play while talking to a third child (to the right); in 6b a boy (age 3) leisurely leans on a girl (age 3) during their play on a couch; or as in 6c, an older girl (age 3) embraces a younger child (age 1) during circle time. Affectionate touches constituted a parallel action to another activity that the children were engaged in, and in such way provided an intimate way of spending time together. Usually, the children's affectionate touches

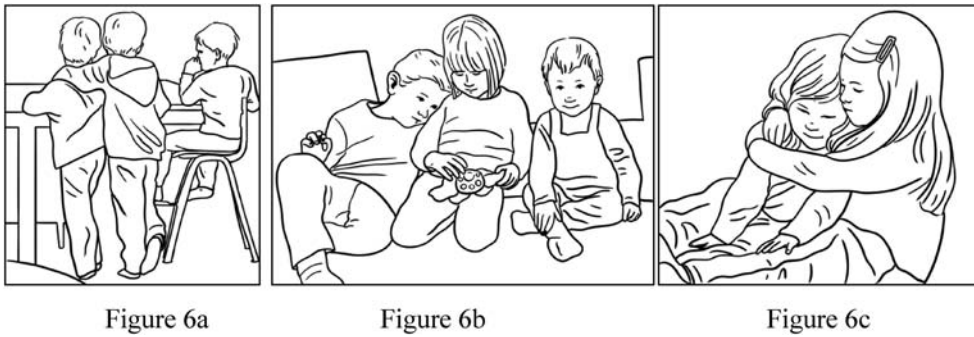


Figure 6 (a–c). Conventional affectionate touches in children’s peer group.

were not introduced or explicated verbally; rather, they evolved spontaneously and were accepted by the recipient child in an ‘unnoticed’ manner. The ways children initiated and responded to affectionate touches show this as a routinised method of socialising in the peer group.

Figure 7 illustrates in more detail how affectionate touches are performed in parallel to a play activity over time. During a chasing game (also featured in Figure 2), Emily instructs the others about the game. Simultaneously, Sara puts her arms around Lisa (Figure 7(b)), then Julie puts her arm under Sara’s arm and keeps it there until Emily finishes the instructions and the game can start (Figure 7(c)).

During this close bodily engagement, neither of the girls (Lisa and Sara) makes any noticeable reaction to the touches, and they do not shift their attention towards the child touching them. Such ways of using and responding to touch show children’s readiness to accept bodily contact and indicate their trusting social relations and a routine way of being together in close embodied constellations.

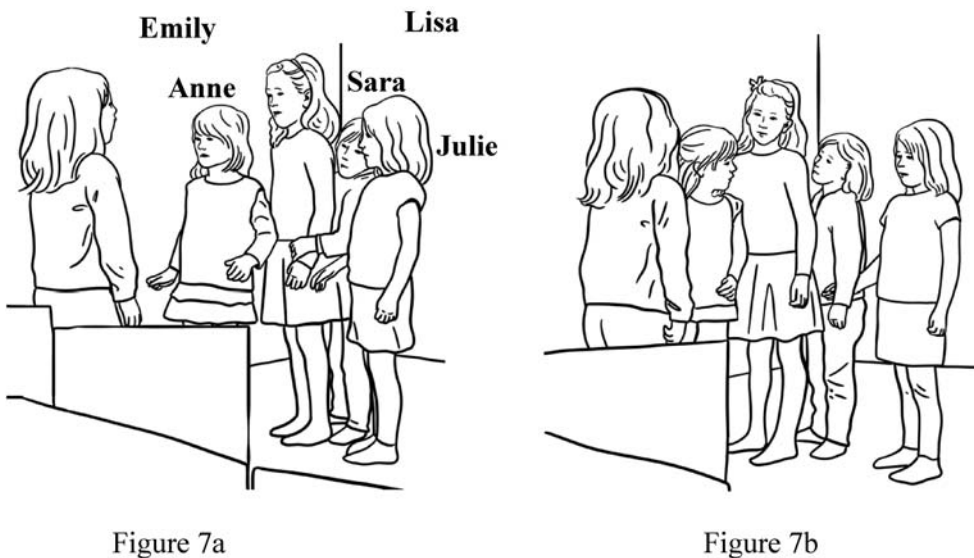


Figure 7 (a,b). Affectionate touch during play.



Figure 8a



Figure 8b



Figure 8c

Figure 8 (a–c). Comforting touch.

Comforting touch

Affectionate comforting touch was used to comfort and soothe a crying peer, but it was rarely used in the peer group (3 instances), although it is frequent in intergenerational educator–child encounters (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018). One possible explanation could be that in early childhood educational settings, young children expect the educators to take the responsibility for managing children's upset (Lipponen 2018). Children's comforting touches clearly served as an integral part of soothing situations where children combined empathetic talk and touch to reassure their distressed peer.

Figure 8 illustrates how two girls (age 4) comfort another girl (age 5) who became upset during a play conflict.

The two girls stroke the upset girl's hair, face and arm, and talk softly as they crouch down in front of her (much like adults who crouch down and position themselves at the eye level of the child). They express compassion with their empathetic facial expressions and suggest a solution to the problem of upset. The upset girl accepts the children's comforting touches and after a while, she also accepts their suggestion for how to continue the play. In this situation, the children use comforting touch in a functional way to resolve the problematic situation.

Touch as part of play design

Touches as part of play involve touch actions that were used to create and sustain a play activity. In other words, the physical contact served as an integral part of the play, for instance in wrestling or chasing games (in comparison to various touch actions that were used during play, but had other functions, cf. Figure 7). Play touches were common primarily between older children (age 4–5) and the most frequent forms were pulling, holding, tickling, shaking and wrestling (21 episodes). Boys appeared to more frequently engage in physical play (15 episodes with only boys; 4 episodes with boys and girls mixed; 4 episodes with only girls). Most play activities were energetic and lively (e.g. chasing and wrestling).

Children engaged in physical play activities both in dyads and in multiparty constellations. They did not only touch each other with their hands, but also other body parts were involved (i.e. torsos and legs) and the touch often included more parts of the children's bodies, compared to other uses of touch.

Children engaged in close intertwining of their whole bodies (Figure 9(a)) and trusted each other to touch vulnerable body parts, such as the abdomen (Figure 9(c)). The way peers engaged with each other physically as part of play displayed their close and committing relations: they granted others access to their whole bodies during physical play activities, including more vulnerable body parts (Figure 9(c)), and arranged themselves in positions of bodily exposure (Figure 9(a)).

Assistive touches

Assistive touches, when children helped each other by using physical contact, were not frequent. They were mainly hand to hand contact and embraces (e.g. from behind as a shepherding action or when lifting a younger child). Both boys and girls used assistive touch, primarily in children's free play (Figure 10(a–c)). Typically, older children assisted younger children (Figure 10(a,b)). Assistive touches also occurred between children of similar age (Figure 10(c)).

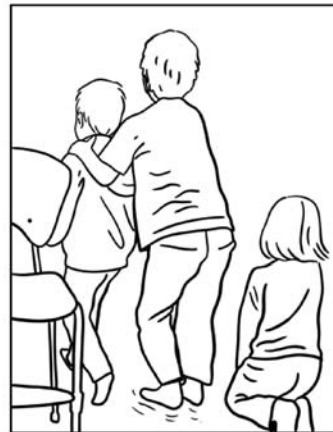


Figure 9a. Wrestling

Figure 9b. Jumping

Figure 9c. Tickling

Figure 9. Touches as part of play. (a) Wrestling (b) Jumping (c) Tickling.

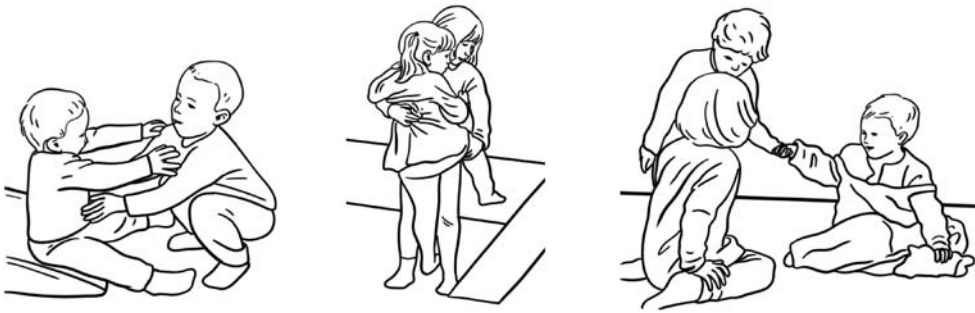


Figure 10a: Catching

Figure 10b: Lifting

Figure 10c: Helping up

Figure 10. Assistive touches (a) Catching (b) Lifting (c) Helping up.

For instance, in [Figure 10\(a\)](#), a 3-year-old boy catches a 1.5-year-old coming down a slide. In [Figure 10\(b\)](#), a 4-year-old girl assists a 1.5-year-old to get on the stairs by lifting and holding her. In [Figure 10\(c\)](#), a 2.5 year-old girl helps another girl aged 2.5 to get up from the floor.

Although not frequent, assistive touches show the peer group's encouraging relations with each other, in that physical assistance also had an affectionate character; the children engaged with each other in close bodily formations (e.g. [Figure 10\(a,b\)](#)). The children were mutually oriented towards the touch action; the child being assisted made his/her body available for assistive touch and also sometimes engaged in a reciprocal touch action (e.g. in an embrace or a grabbing of a hand). Also, the younger children (age 1–2) were oriented towards others' availability to assist and could interpret a bodily configuration – how bodies were positioned in relation to each other, e.g. facing each other, hand reaching out – as an offer of assistive touch (e.g. [Figure 10\(a,c\)](#)).

'Body-object' touches

'Body-object' touches (7 instances) refer to touch actions when a child engages in physical contact with another child's body in a way that resembles touching inanimate objects. These touches were not primarily designed for communicative purposes, but rather served practical functions when children, for instance, leaned on another child's body for support. They either rested a body part (an arm or a foot) on the peer ([Figure 11\(b\)](#)), leaned on the other child for reasons of balance ([Figure 11\(c\)](#)) or reached over or moved over another child ([Figure 11\(a\)](#)).

This kind of touch action was performed by both boys and girls and was found in free play activities. 'Body-object' touches were not used to organise interaction between the children and in this sense did not have any clear social function. Still, the occurrence of this kind of touch shows the children's close social relations and their direct way of using touch in the peer group. As in many cases of touch contact with peers, this kind of touch was both produced and received without the involved children explicitly noticing. The immediate access to other children's bodies resembles family interaction where children and caregivers regularly engage in close bodily intertwining as a way of being together (Goodwin and Cekaite 2018). Children readily accepted each other's physical proximity and contact as part of their everyday activities at the preschool.



Figure 11a: Climbing over

Figure 11b: Resting foot

Figure 11c: Support

Figure 11. Body-object touches: (a) Climbing over (b) Resting foot (c) Support.

Conclusions

The present study revealed that children engage in touch interactions with each other for a variety of social and communicative purposes, both during free play and teacher-organised activities. Children's peer relations and friendships involved extended forms of touch in both gender groups; touch occurred between both boys and girls, and in mixed gender constellations. Similar to what has been shown in previous studies (Fleck and Chavajay 2009; Cigales et al. 1996), children's touch behaviour in peer groups differed with age. Communicative touch (which was the focus of the present study) was less common among younger children: we found few episodes when younger children (age 1–2) initiated touch contact (cf. Fleck and Chavajay 2009). Rather, younger children commonly received touch contact from older children, and older children were seen to nurture their younger peers during their multi-age peer group activities (similar to adult caregiver practices). This is in line with results reported in Cigales et al. (1996), where children from the age of 4 are suggested to demonstrate more adult-like touch behaviours.

Frequent purposes of children's peer touch: control and affection

As children spent a considerable amount of their time in close proximity to each other, their opportunities for social privacy were reduced (cf. Corsaro 2005). In such socio-material contexts, children commonly formed smaller social groups that consisted of two to four children. Both affectionate and control touch played a significant role when children protected and displayed small social units within the larger group of children in the preschool.

By using controlling touches, children organised the peer group and the material setting of the preschool. Children used control touch to structure their play groups and to prevent outsiders from entering both play groups and a current area for play, as well as to gain access to play objects. In such cases, controlling touch was used to manage the other's bodily presence or actions, e.g. by pushing the undesired participants away. Through strong and sustained touches as well as subtle, brief encounters, children organised their activities and secured the continuation of their play (Figure 2(a–c), Figures 3 and 4). As demonstrated by studies on intergenerational, educator-initiated

touch, controlling touch was the most frequent category used in preschool encounters. However, there are significant differences between how adults manage physical control compared to the children's peer groups (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018; Burdelski 2010; Kern 2018; Holm Kvist 2018). Educators' (mildly) controlling touch was primarily related to management of preschool practices. In contrast, for the children, control touches were primarily used to protect and guard social constellations, and spatial areas of play.

In addition, touch and physical proximity between children played an important role in manifesting affiliation and friendship, and secure social groups. Children embraced each other, caressingly touched the other during play, or boys engaged in rough-and-tumble play (Figures 6(a–c), Figure 7(a–b), Figure 9(a,c)). Affectionate touch played a central role in children's friendship groups as 'tie-signs', i.e. embodied and proxemic ways of displaying the quality of their social relation (Goffman 1972). In such ways, touch was used to establish and uphold, intimate social relations, and to form and sustain smaller social units. While educators in preschools have been shown to use touch in explicit caring situations, for example by closely embracing, holding and caressing a child in one's lap (Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018), children's way of using affectionate touch recurrently featured as a sub-activity in parallel with some other, main activity, such as play. Children's displays of affection through touch were not a highlighted, focal activity, but performed in more low-key forms and seemed to be a routine way of being together with peers.

Touch cultures and social relations in preschool peer group interactions

The present study suggests that the use of touch between children both reflects and influences the character of social relations. Touch actions were an integral part of peer interactions: children both initiated and received peer touch without paying these embodied actions specific attention. Children granted others access to their whole bodies and they trusted each other to touch even vulnerable body parts, such as the abdomen and the face (Figure 6(c), Figure 8(a), Figure 9(a,c)). Children's touch regularly occurred in parallel with other activities and was routinely not verbally topicalised as a focal point of interaction (cf. recurrent verbalisation in adult interactions, Cekaite 2015). These characteristics suggest that children's uses and experiences of peer touch constitute specific touch cultures.

More specifically, children's casual ways of physically engaging with each other indicate that they form close socially embodied relations with their peers; preschool peer group constellations can, therefore, be suggested as a significant context for children's socio-emotional development beyond the verbal ways (Rubin, Bukowski, and Bowker 2015; Corsaro 2005). On the one hand, the preschool peer group provides affordances for building and developing close social relations, and trust is shown in how children closely engage bodily with each other. On the other hand, the analysis of children's touch conduct indicates a prerequisite for children to define the boundaries of their social sphere and limit their relational engagement during their day at the preschool.

By examining video-recordings of everyday interactions in a preschool, the present study was able to analyse and provide empirical support concerning how children orient towards each other as *embodied beings*, as being touchable and movable, agentive

and mindful. We argue that it is through the analysis of actual embodied and verbal conduct – such as the kind of touch used, how, in what situations and for what purposes – that norms and expectations, i.e. touch cultures, can be outlined and described. The perspective on children's initiatives and ways to orient towards the others in embodied manner is largely absent from research and the current study brings a new perspective to the discussions of the use of touch in preschools.

Notes

1. The recordings were made by an associate researcher at Linköping university, Disa Bergnehr.
2. 'Communicating emotions, embodying morality', PI Asta Cekaite, financed by VR (Swedish Research Council).
3. Regionala etikprövningsnämnden i Linköping, Avdelning för prövning av övrig forskning. (Regional ethical review board in Linköping, Section for review of general research).

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