



# Not okay: Preschool teachers talk about inappropriate touching

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigates views and experiences described by Swedish preschool teachers regarding inappropriate and unprofessional physical touching between educators and children. The empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews with 30 preschool teachers. The interviews were analysed with thematic analysis, and further examined in the light of the concepts 'becoming' and 'being'. The results show that educators consider it inappropriate and unprofessional for staff to grab or restrain a child, or to touch a child without observing the child's signals, as doing so violates the child's integrity. It is also deemed wrong to carry or 'help' a capable child, as this is considered undermining the child's agency. Further, to kiss a child is also deemed inappropriate and unprofessional. The informants have, however, slightly different approaches and experiences regarding kissing. The results show that preschool teachers struggle with these issues. The boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate touching may be difficult to draw up. And in concrete situations, the concepts 'becoming' and 'being' are not always easy to separate. The study concludes that both preschool teacher education and workplaces should pay attention to the subtle, but culturally and socially permeated, issues of touch.

**Keywords:** *preschool, touching, inappropriate touch, preschool teachers*

## Introduction

In this study, we investigate preschool teachers' views and experiences of physical touching between educators and children that is considered inappropriate and unprofessional. Thus, we focus on the boundary of appropriate touch. Our starting point

is that children need physical contact; it has long been known that touch is of central importance for infants to develop normally both physically and mentally (Underdown, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2010). Preschool children also need touch. In preschools, physical contact is often used to facilitate communication between educators and children. A study of preschoolers in the US suggests that touch, such as a friendly pat on the back, can promote positive behaviours in children (Leonard, Berkowitz, & Shusterman, 2014). Touch can also promote a good learning climate (Stamatis & Kontaktos, 2008).

Attitudes towards physical contact have been studied with regard to cultural variations (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2016; Hansen, 2010). In a study by Dibiasse and Gunnoe (2004), different cultural groups were observed and compared. The results revealed that Italians touched more than Czechs, who touched more than persons from the US. Other studies have found that individuals from northern European countries touch each other less than individuals from southern European countries (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2016). Furthermore, more physical contact occurs between French parents and their children than between parents in the US and their children (Hansen, 2010). Studies have also shown cultural differences in terms of how touching on the skin is perceived (Schut et al., 2013).

Researchers from several different countries have found that touching between adults and children has largely come to be associated with abuse and sexual intentions, which has led educators in preschool and school to become increasingly cautious about physical contact (Fletcher, 2013; Hedlin, Åberg, & Johansson, 2019; Jones, 2004; Piper & Stronach, 2008; Scott, 2008). Despite this, physical contact commonly occurs between educators and children in many countries. For instance, in Swedish preschools, educators employ touch for building positive social relations and for monitoring and controlling children in a soft way (Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2018). In early childhood education in Japan, close physical contact is regarded as an important means of embodying the group experience (Burke & Duncan, 2016), and a Spanish study, exploring how a group of pre-service teachers responded to and negotiated touch with children in school, suggests that physical contact between educators and children is common practice in Spain (Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Álvarez, 2018). Similarly, physical contact also regularly occurs in kindergarten in Hungary (Varga Nagy, Palfi, & Szerepi, 2018).

Children are also subjected to physical abuse and punishment from both parents and teachers, often for instructive purposes. Just as studies have shown a link between affectionate touch and positive outcomes for infants (e.g. reducing infants' stress responses and fostering secure attachment)(Underdown et al., 2010), touch, such as corporal punishment, is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes (e.g., antisocial behaviour, lower intellectual achievement and mental health problems) (Smith,

2006). Research has shown that children report feeling fear and anger when they are spanked (Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006), and longitudinal studies have demonstrated that being spanked is predictive of an increase in aggression (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013). Gershoff et al. (2018) argue, that decades of empirical research on spanking and physical punishment show that these acts pose harm to children's welfare, and that corporal punishment is in general linked with the same negative outcome for children as physical abuse.

The idea that children's physical and mental integrity is to be respected has gained increasing attention. In 1979, Sweden became the first country in the world to legislate against parents' right to punish their children physically in childrearing. The new legislation meant that children should not be subjected to bodily harm or other abusive treatment. The change was introduced as recognition of children's rights to physical integrity and dignity (Durrant, 2003; Durrant & Stewart-Tufescu, 2017). Nowadays, many countries have adopted similar legislation. Since 2017, more than 50 countries have laws prohibiting all physical punishment of children (Grogan-Kaylor, Ma, & Graham-Bermann, 2018).

The background presented above shows that touching is important for children's development, and also that children's rights to self-determination and bodily integrity have been formally reinforced. However, there is a lack of research concerning physical contact that is not described by laws or policy documents – namely, the often subtle boundaries of what is perceived as appropriate / inappropriate physical touching (Leonard et al., 2014). Preschool teachers work professionally with the physical contact with children, which means that it is part of their professional knowledge to decide which touching is appropriate and which is inappropriate. What preschool teachers deem as 'inappropriate behaviour' is understood by us from the point of educators' perceptions of children. The view of children and childhood will be discussed in the next section.

## **Children and childhood**

The view of children and childhood has varied over time (Cunningham, 1998; Larsson, 2012). Two different ways of considering children, becoming and being, have gained considerable attention. The child as becoming can be said to mean that the child is mainly regarded as immature and undergoing a process whereby he or she is becoming increasingly social. Childhood is seen as a transport route whose end goal is the finished, rational adult individual. This approach is based on a developmental psychological perspective. In contrast to this view, a new paradigm, one claiming that children can be seen as independent social actors, gained ground during the 1990s. The child as being is based on the notion that a child is both a competent individual and rational social actor, here and now, not just in a developmental perspective. The viewpoint that each child has

his or her own needs, desires and intentions (Halldén, 2007; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998) underscores and is underscored by the legal stance stating that children should have the same legal protections as adults from physical abuse (European Council, 2006).

The concepts 'being' and 'becoming' have been discussed and subjected to criticism by many scholars. Arneil (2002) argues that when children are viewed as competent beings, this can mean that they are seen as 'proto-adults', and as such their need for care may be neglected. Sommer (2005) puts forward the notion that 'the competent child' levels out the hierarchical relationship between adults and children. This, argues Månsson (2008), can lead adults to a fear of being authoritarian, which can prevent them from exercising their experience and authority in situations in which children need support. Lee (2001) points out that we are all 'beings' in the sense that neither children nor adults are fully developed individuals – that is, we are all faced with demands for change and flexibility, regardless of age.

Moreover, the concepts 'being' and 'becoming' have been criticised for reproducing mutually exclusive oppositions. There is a desire to find more flexible and non-dualistic ways of thinking (Prout, 2005). Further, Prout (2011) objects to the myth of the autonomous and independent individual, as we all, irrespective of age, belong to a multiplex web of interdependencies. He argues that seeing both children and adults as neither stable and fixed, nor independent, should not be in opposition to their right to be treated with respect.

### ***Children in Swedish preschool***

The Swedish preschool is characterised by a view of children as competent beings. They are thus seen as rational, as having the ability to act independently, and as having the right to be treated with respect (Halldén, 2007). The Swedish preschool has its own curriculum and is part of the school system. In the curriculum, children's dignity is underscored. For example, the curriculum states that each child must experience his or her own value and must have his or her needs respected and satisfied. This is further emphasised in the revised curriculum effective 1 July 2019, in which a child's right to bodily integrity is stressed (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019). The Education Act, which also encompasses preschool, states that children must not be subjected to abusive treatment in school. All teachers have an obligation to report if the staff are mistreating children. The duty to report means that teachers are required to inform their preschool director or principal, who in turn must report to the official responsible for taking action (SFS, 2010:800; Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2017). Since these issues are handled by preschool staff, the current study may be used as a basis for reflection and discussion. In this study, we focus on the type of physical contact that a group of qualified preschool teachers deems inappropriate, but that is not so serious as to be subject to the

obligation to report. Furthermore, as Dahlberg and Moss (2005) maintain, although there may be curricula and guidelines for preschool teachers' work, educators also create their own norms that in turn determine their conduct.

## **Purpose of the study**

The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate touching. By inappropriate touching, we mean physical contact that is not illegal, but that is deemed to be unsuitable and unprofessional by preschool teachers. We thus address the following research question:

What views and experiences do preschool teachers describe regarding inappropriate and unprofessional physical touching between educators and children?

## **Method**

The present study is part of a larger project entitled 'Touch in Preschool Care or Risk?', funded by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, no. 2014–2121). The project entails a study of how Swedish preschools and the preschool teacher education programme discuss and handle touch between educators and children.

As the question of physical contact between educators and children is sparsely investigated in the Swedish context, the overall project is explorative in nature. The project started with a questionnaire survey aimed at obtaining a broad picture of how preschool teachers relate to physical contact between themselves and the children. The questionnaire was distributed at large preschool teacher conferences. It contained information about the purpose of the research project and its design, as well as the disclosure that participation was completely voluntary and that the data would be handled confidentially and used only for scientific purposes. Information was also provided about an interview study that was to be conducted, and therefore the opportunity was given to those who wished to be interviewed to provide their contact information. Everyone else participated in the survey anonymously. Altogether 189 questionnaires were obtained.

Those who reported their interest in being interviewed ( $n = 33$ ) were contacted 6–12 months later. We managed to make appointments with 25 of them. Five additional participants were recruited via strategic selection. These participants received information about the design and purpose of the project when they were contacted to participate. They were also informed that their participation was completely voluntary

and that the interviews would be recorded, transcribed and then sent to them to verify that no misconceptions had occurred during transcription. They were also told that the project would lead to research that would be published, and that the interviews would be anonymised prior to publication.

Consequently, individual semi-structured interviews with 30 preschool teachers working in Swedish preschools were conducted. Of these teachers, 20 worked with groups of children and 10 worked as preschool directors. As a group, the teachers were heterogeneous; they ranged in age from 32 to 63 and had between 7 and 42 years of experience working in preschool. There were 11 men and 19 women. All were qualified preschool teachers. Twenty-five interviews took place at the workplace, while, for practical reasons, five interviews took place outside the workplace in a room where the interview could be conducted without disturbance.

We pursued an open-ended approach, as we have found no study conducted in a Swedish preschool context which investigates the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate touching as perceived by preschool teachers. An interview guide was used during the interviews, but as a conversation-like situation was sought, the questions were not asked exactly in the same way to each informant. The order of questions also varied by informant. In addition, the answers often led to consequential questions and the development of new arguments, which was welcomed and encouraged.

Each interview began with questions about the informant's background and more general questions about the preschool teacher profession. Subsequently, issues that addressed physical contact between teachers and children were addressed. Examples of questions asked included: Is physical touching discussed in the staff group? Do you have any pronounced policy or consensus regarding touch? Has it ever happened that you felt uncomfortable in your physical contact with the children? Have you experienced colleagues physically touching the children in a way that made you feel uncomfortable? The interviews, lasting between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, were recorded and carried out in Swedish. The quoted excerpts shown in the results section have been translated from Swedish. The informants have been given pseudonyms in the study.

## **Data analysis**

The empirical material was processed according to thematic analysis, meaning that the transcribed interviews were examined with the objective of uncovering recurring themes. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), the material was transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews had been conducted, which meant the interviews were recalled in memory, awakening in turn analytical impressions and ideas. The analysis was

conducted in several steps. At first, the material was read carefully with the intent of obtaining an overview and preliminary overall picture. The next step involved focusing on the purpose of the study and reading the material from the viewpoint of the research question. This meant that the sections in the material where informants questioned touch actions, or discussed them as less appropriate, were marked and, subsequently, the marked sections were given preliminary headings. These preliminary headings were compared with respect to similarities and differences. Comparisons led to headings with similar content being put together, after which new comparisons were made. Some concrete examples of these preliminary headings include “taking firmly”, “grabbing”, “being rough” and “restraining”. A closer examination and comparison of the headings and the excerpts led to “taking firmly”, “grabbing” and “being rough” being put together to form a common heading, which then became the theme “roughly grabbing”, while “restraining” became its own theme. In the end, five themes were established, namely roughly grabbing, firmly restraining, touching without asking or observing the child’s signals, carrying or ‘helping’ capable children and kissing.

After having established the five themes, we wanted to broaden our analytical focus to the present day Swedish preschool curriculum. As this is permeated by a view of children as ‘becoming’ (Halldén, 2007), we brought in the concepts of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ to our analysis to be able to connect our concrete and mundane themes to the professionally crucial, and abstract, question of child view. Our discussion draws on Uprichard (2008), who argued that the two concepts may be used together. According to Uprichard, both concepts are insufficient and cannot capture the complexity of childhood. Neither perceiving the child as a human ‘being’ nor a human ‘becoming’ is in itself satisfactory. The concepts, however, can be used together in complementary ways.

The child as a competent being characterises Swedish preschool discourse; in practice, however, other views of the child can co-exist (Månsson, 2008). This is why we found it fruitful in this study to use both becoming and being (or competent) a child as analytical (not moral) concepts. By analysing the informants’ reflections on ‘inappropriate touch’ through the notions of becoming and being, we were able to uncover the professional differences and similarities between preschool teachers, rather than viewing them as personal and psychological dispositions.

## Results

Below is described the five different themes emerging from the material. The first theme deals with situations where informants perceive that children have been grabbed in a rough manner. Closely associated with this issue is theme two, which revolves around the question of whether it is okay for a teacher to physically restrain a child. Other types of

touch that are viewed as less appropriate are discussed subsequently. The third theme discusses situations where teachers touch children without asking for their permission, the fourth revolves around carrying or 'helping' children with things they can do themselves, and lastly kisses are discussed.

### **Roughly grabbing**

When reflecting on and reasoning about touch, several preschool teachers spoke about situations in which they thought they themselves had crossed the line concerning what is acceptable. Walter, who has worked in preschool since the late 1970s and is now a preschool director, addressed his own shortcomings and how actions like rough grabbing could occur. Earlier, when he worked as an educator with a group of children, he did not always act in accordance with what was best for the children. As an example, he reported grabbing a child and ordering the child where to stand. Walter would today describe this act as a way of creating order when a situation is not being managed.

*Walter: When I worked as a teacher, I probably experienced that I was a little rough with the children sometimes. I can admit that without a doubt. You did it so that you could make order and because you were not managing the situation, so you grabbed the child and said, 'Now you go over here'.*

Interviewer: *Mm.*

*Walter: 'Ouch that hurts!' 'Now you go away and stand over here'. You didn't really do what was best for the child.*

Henry also talked about how he acted in a wrong way in the past. Despite happening several years ago, it was apparent that this action weighed heavily on Henry's conscience and often occupied his thoughts. Henry described how he once roughly grabbed a boy. He had been tired after a long week, and as he explained it, he did not have full control over himself. He grabbed the boy too firmly. Henry asserted that it was not right to grab the boy so roughly. Afterwards, it weighed on his conscience: *'Ugh, I really shouldn't do that. I felt I didn't have 100% control over myself there'*, he stated.

Deciding what is right or wrong, however, is not always that simple. The preschool teachers described unprofessional, inappropriate touching in terms of crossing a boundary. But it is often unclear whether such a boundary has been crossed, and sometimes the staff can have different opinions on the issue. For instance, holding a child's arm can be considered crossing the line, or boundary, if viewed as firmly grabbing the child. Carina stated that you often must take the arm of a child who does not listen. She emphasised that it should not hurt, but that it is sometimes necessary in order to get through to a child who otherwise would not obey the educator's instructions. However, it may happen in a way that is unacceptable. Once, several years ago, Carina had a co-worker who grabbed the arm of a child far too brusquely. Carina intervened, and her co-worker



ultimately apologised to the child. Colleagues who are criticised for their actions, however, do not always agree that they have acted incorrectly. Emma spoke about a colleague who did not have respect for the children. This colleague would grab the child's arm or hand and nearly drag the child away. In response, Emma and another colleague confronted their rough-mannered colleague. However, their views were not acknowledged.

*Emma: I reacted at a preschool I was at. The child did not have anything to say about it. It was like, 'I am the adult. I am the one who decides. Now you go there', and she took the arm or hand and almost pulled the child the other way. Then I spoke with my closest colleague and asked how she felt about it. She also felt it was very unpleasant. Then we talked to this colleague who had done this. But she did not see it at all in the same way.*

Interviewer: *No.*

*Emma: She thought the child had behaved disobediently and that it was her task to correct and reprimand this child.*

Common to the examples presented above is that they concern reprimanding children who do not obey. From the point of view of the child, this can be interpreted as an expression of the view that children are in a stage of becoming, where adults are self-evident authorities and obliged to guide children into correct manners. Emma, on the other hand, stressed the need to respect the child's integrity, and she regarded grabbing as inappropriate touching. This can therefore be interpreted as seeing the child as being.

### **Firmly restraining**

Restraining children was also considered inappropriate by the preschool teachers. Restraining a child was described in a way similar to grabbing a child. If and how someone firmly holds a child is also an issue that can be difficult to judge yet involves the risk of a boundary being crossed. Previously, it was considered appropriate to restrain a child who needed to calm down, as Lisa explained. Now, however, educators only restrain a child if absolutely necessary, and they let go as soon as possible. Lisa stated that it was important to avoid conflict, even to turn away a bit so that you are not perceived as threatening. The optimal solution would be for an upset child to calm down in peace and quiet, if they do not seek physical contact themselves. But in practice, it is not always that easy: *'Where does the boundary lie? I have to protect the others if there is someone who hits and overturns shelves'*, Lisa stated.

Mentioned above is that other children may need protection if agitated children act out on their feelings. In such cases, it may be necessary to restrain agitated children. The inappropriate touch of firmly restraining a child is often described as a conflict between an educator and a child. Nina was in this particular conflict situation, which culminated in her crossing this boundary. The situation involved a boy who was often difficult to

manage. There was no order in his home, and he was often tired, and thus he became troublesome, Nina said. She tried once to get him to sleep, but instead it became a drawn-out physical struggle. Nina said that doing so was a violation on her part.

*Nina: There was a child who had a very hard time at home. This child, sometimes when he was so tired, he lived at odds with everyone and everything. He was contrary to what we were going to do or what the other children wanted to do. He was out to sabotage in order to get a reaction. He didn't feel well. He was so tired and exhausted; he certainly hadn't slept. Maybe there was television or videos and no real order at home. He was four years old, and you knew he needed to go and sleep. Once I said to him, 'Now we go in and sleep'. [...] And I had body contact then, too. I pulled him in and held him on the sofa. But that did not work very well, because he became crazy, and finally I was forced to let him go and he ran out again, but that probably went on for 20 minutes, the struggle to get him to stay on the sofa. So that was a violation, and a lot of body contact. I tried to get him to sit on my lap, too.*

The above quote describes how the conflict that led to restraining was about getting rest. Another situation, taken up in a similar way, is when children are told to get dressed, for example, before everyone is to go outside. Often, but not always, these examples of conflicts depict a roughness that the co-worker reacts to and disagrees with. When there is no roughness or heavy-handedness, it can be difficult to judge whether the action is inappropriate. One preschool teacher, who was talking about the children getting dressed, described a situation in which the educator was not rough, but she did restrain a child and dress him against his will. Kristina, who talked about the incident, could not decide whether this classified as a violation.

*Kristina: We had a child who absolutely did not want to get dressed, absolutely not. When his parents came to pick him up, the child did not want to get dressed. It was cold winter, and they were going home. I saw what another educator on the staff did. She sat down on the floor and said exactly what she was going to do. She was very calm and then she took the child, who did not want to, in her lap. She took hold of his arms and stuffed them in the sleeves of the snow overall, gently but determinedly. 'Now we are the ones who decide and mum is standing and waiting. And so now I am helping mum'. She just explained everything with a calm voice and in a very nice way, in order to show who decided. So I do not know if that is right or wrong. But I felt that ... He was a very particular child with a very strong will, and so she chose to do it this way. Then I do not know if that follows the textbooks or not; I cannot answer that. [...] It required quite a lot from the educator and from the child also. But the parent could not get the child to come; she could not get his clothes on. That is something I can think of. Then I do not know ... That is what you do, I thought. I have not questioned it – well yes, I have.*

*Interviewer: Now you sound doubtful, like you do not really know what to think.*

*Kristina: At the time I thought this is how you do it. It worked, but at the same time, it felt strange. [...] Yes, now I get a little hesitant if you have ... but at the same time the educator did it in such a nice way. She explained and it was in a very instructive way, but now I start to wonder whether you may do so. Are you allowed to do that? Or how should you do it otherwise? I don't know.*

The situation portrayed in the quotation above shows how hard it can be to judge whether a specific action is an inappropriate physical touch or rather can be classified as an action falling within the scope of what is acceptable, or perhaps even appropriate, given the current situation. The situation also underscores that perceptions of children as either becoming or being are much more intertwined than they may appear from a more theoretical perspective. Kristina described how the teacher acted ‘gently but determinedly’, where ‘gently’ stressed the respect associated with the child as being, while ‘determinedly’ foregrounds the child as needing guidance and an adult as an authority, aspects that are more in line with seeing the child as becoming.

### **Touching without asking or observing the child’s signals**

Another type of touch that the preschool teachers did not approve of is a well-intended, routine action performed in a way that objectifies the children. Treating children in this way is not considered professional. The educators who had lengthy experience in the profession talked about a changed way of looking at children.

Several of the informants underwent teacher training as far back as the 1970s or early 1980s. They stated that, today, there is another way of looking at both touching and children. Nowadays, according to these informants, one is careful about how to touch children, and parents are also more sensitive about whether preschool staff are acting in a way that could be considered inappropriate. During the 1990s a new perception spread on how children should be treated. The preschool acquired a curriculum, in which the fundamental values of preschool were discussed and as a consequence of which staff received substantial in-service training. Actions that would today be considered not only relatively uncommon, but also violations, occurred to a much greater extent just a few decades ago. Although such shortcomings still happen, they are more uncommon, the educators argued.

This unprofessional approach was depicted as educators not being sensitive to what the child wants – for example, when an educator does not see that the child does not want the physical contact that the educator is offering. The preschool teachers mentioned colleagues who cross the children’s boundaries and do not respect the children’s integrity. Although this most often occurs among unqualified co-workers, it can also involve older colleagues, particularly in the past, who would ‘herd’ a child in front of them to get the child to move along. Earlier, one could pick up and move a child without checking with the child first. The informants talked about how the view of children has changed, from adults handling children as they thought best to adults seeing children as individuals, which involves treating them in another way.

Informants stressed that showing respect for children’s wishes and views is of central importance, but it can be difficult to get clear answers if one asks the children what they

want. Very young children can have a difficult time expressing themselves, and older children might not always explain what they want. Being receptive to what the children communicate in other ways is therefore important. Linda emphasised that you must be especially careful about physical contact with children whom you do not know. But a practicum student at Linda's preschool did not have a feel for that. Linda is always careful to make eye contact before she approaches a child. The practicum student, however, took hold of a child during circle time without first checking with the child.

*Linda: I never impose myself on a child. I always want to have contact with the child first, that you look in the eyes; I never go up and take hold of a child. But my practicum student did that the other day. We had circle time, and there was one song where you hug each other in the last verse, the child and the adult. Then my practicum student went and hugged one of the children, but that child did not know her and became very scared.*

It is not only eye contact that is used to determine what the child wants. The preschool teachers also talked about reading the children's body language. It may happen that, using their body language, children clearly convey that they, for example, do not want to be picked up to be comforted. But some educators pick up children in their arms anyway. This action is provided as an example of an inappropriate way of touching children. Susanne remarked about a colleague who was not good at observing children's body language. Susanne described a situation in which a child clearly communicated through body language that he did not want to be picked up. Yet, the colleague picked up the child anyway. '*She didn't read the signals at all*', Susanne said about her colleague.

Erik, who is a preschool director, addressed the so-called duty to report, which is the obligation educators have to report a colleague who violates children. In connection with staff discussions about this matter, attempts have been made to delimit the border for violations. Some of Erik's co-workers believed it was a violation to wipe a child's nose without asking. Erik himself stated that he has given children friendly pats on the head without asking, even though he pondered whether this could also be seen as a violation.

*Erik: So then we talked about that also, what is a violation? We have tried to define what we mean then. And that is when we get into this, some see it as offensive if you wipe a child's nose without asking. Patting a child on the head can also be perceived as offensive. But I have done that sometimes and I feel it more as being friendly. It is a kind of touching, but I haven't asked, 'What did you think about me patting you on the head?'*

Erik and his staff have discussed their obligation to report and have tried to define which actions are violations. This discussion often occurs in connection with the actualising of the compulsory plan against abuse and harassment that each preschool and school must establish (cf. Lundin & Torpsten, 2018).

As can be seen in the examples above, not reading the child's body language and wiping a child's nose without asking are actions deemed inappropriate and may be interpreted as expressions of seeing the child as 'becoming' and not old enough to be respected as an

individual. In contrast, stressing that you should never impose yourself on a child, and that you must look for consent by asking or observing the child's body language, can be interpreted as acts of respect for the child's integrity that are associated with the child as 'being'.

### **Carrying or 'helping' capable children**

The preschool teachers disapproved of grabbing roughly, restraining firmly and other forms of touching that occur without respect for the children's integrity. There is also a fourth type of touch considered to be inappropriate: underestimating and/or belittling the children by doing things for them that they can do themselves. This will be developed further below.

The preschool teachers who had extensive professional experience described how they now relate to picking up and carrying children compared with how it was done two or three decades ago. In the past, staff would carry the children a lot in preschool, especially very young children. A preschool teacher with a child on her hip was a common sight. With regard to the staff's bodies, it is important to be careful with heavy lifting and other movements that can cause injury. This, however, is not just a matter of the staff's work environment, but also a matter of the view of the child that prevails today. Some preschools have lowered swings and other play equipment that the children would otherwise be unable to climb on and off by themselves. The educators stated that they expected the children to do the things that they were able to do. They encouraged the children to learn and manage tasks, such as walking by themselves and dressing. In the entryway, there are often aids to make it easier for the children to dress themselves or to dress with the help of an adult, but without being lifted.

Anna explained that her work team discussed a range of issues when they were going to start working together. One of the things they agreed upon was that they would neither carry the children nor sit them on their laps.

*We discussed a lot how we could be more dispensable, that the children would not be so dependent on us. This meant, for example, that we would not needlessly have the children in our laps. It is not about not having physical contact. It is about why we are there. [...] It is not a matter of the touching being bad, but we want to make the children independent, that they would not depend on us in that way. So it is a matter of how you view children.*

If an educator becomes sick, it may happen that the substitute to complete the staff is unqualified and perhaps inexperienced. In this situation, teachers explain to the substitute how they think and how they work. This also applies when they have practicum students at the preschool – for example, students from the preschool teacher education programme. As Margareta, one of the preschool teachers, explained:

*We say that we want independent children. We want them to try for themselves first, so that you do not treat them as babies right away and just dress them.*

The view of children as competent beings who are not to be belittled by adults doing everything for them means that the preschool children should not be picked up, carried or treated in ways that were common a couple of decades ago. Even though substitutes or practicum students may have good intentions when they, for example, dress a child who can dress herself or himself, it is considered inappropriate to do so. To do so would be to degrade the competent child and also to undermine the child's agency.

## **Kissing**

The fifth and final type of touching classified as inappropriate and unprofessional is kissing the children. The informants had, however, slightly different approaches and experiences regarding kissing. They described a norm, an invisible boundary, which may vary depending on the situation. Often, they had never discussed this with their colleagues. Rather, it was more akin to something that you 'just know'.

Some of the preschool teachers, especially those who worked with the oldest preschoolers, said that it seldom or never happens that educators kiss children. Many of the informants also definitively claimed that kissing between educators and children does not belong in preschool. The educators hug the children, pat them and caress them, and are physically close, but they do not kiss. The children may kiss their parents, but not their educators in preschool.

Björn qualified to be a preschool teacher in the early 1980s and has since worked for many years as a preschool director. He stated that, in the past, about two to three decades ago, it was not uncommon for staff to kiss children, but not today. If that were to happen, it would be '*extremely unprofessional*', he said, explaining:

*Björn: I think kissing is such an intimate act. I kiss those who are near and dear to me and that relationship I am not going to have with the children in preschool, because then I deviate from my professionalism. Then I have gone a step too far in the relationship to the children and in the end, there may be problems with their parents.*

*Interviewer: But your staff, do they all think like you?*

*Björn: I think it was much more prevalent in the '80s and '90s. Today I do not see anyone kissing the children. You hug the children, but kiss ... No, I haven't actually seen that in a very, very long time.*

Others said that a kiss occasionally may happen, maybe on the neck of a small child or as a result of the child's initiative, if it is an older child. A child may kiss an educator on the hand or arm, and that is okay. Other times, the children may want to kiss the educators on the mouth. Even though that is not okay, it is common for educators to deviate from the principle of not accepting kisses on these occasions. On such occasions, the educators

often allow the children to kiss them on the cheek. This applies especially to children whose background is from a country where kissing on the cheek is a common way to greet people. Carin, a preschool director for a multicultural preschool, stated that her staff take into account the children's background.

*Carin: We have children from different countries, and in some countries that is how you greet someone, you kiss on the cheek. So it would be strange if you said you should not kiss.*

Another exception to the rule of not allowing kissing between educators and children is when children, at least in that specific situation, are considered to be in need of affirmation.

*Interviewer: Someone reasoning about that said she receives kisses on the cheek, but not on the mouth. What do you think about that?*

*Lena: I have accepted kisses on the mouth a couple of times. That is not entirely natural for me, but those times were because that child needed it.*

*Interviewer: Mmm*

*Lena: The child needed to show that appreciation and be strengthened in my receiving and appreciating it, instead of me having done this (turns away her face). Then I would have hurt that child. So I choose to do it. But when it comes to children with good self-esteem, then I want to uphold what is also so important, that no one should be allowed to do anything to me or to other people that I or they do not want.*

To refrain from kissing can be interpreted as an expression of respecting the child's integrity, since kissing is considered an intimate act that belongs in the family. This thus reflects seeing the child as 'being'. However, as shown in the quotation above, appropriate physical touching, according to the informants, is not only about the view of the child and about respecting the children's integrity, but it is also a question of one's own personal boundaries and avoiding doing something that feels uncomfortable, even if exceptions are made.

## Discussion

In this study, we have investigated how Swedish preschool teachers draw the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate touching using the research question: What views and experiences do preschool teachers express regarding inappropriate physical touching between educators and children?

The results show that it is considered inappropriate when preschool staff grab a child, restrain a child, touch a child without asking or being observant of the child's signals, carry or 'help' a capable child, or kiss a child. We have analysed these results, building on

notions of the child as either becoming or being. While contemporary Swedish preschool discourse stresses that children are competent and have the right to integrity, this view, in practice, runs parallel with more developmental perspectives and the authority of adults.

Rough actions, as depicted by preschool teachers when discussing experiences with educators who have grabbed a child or restrained a child, appear nowadays to be clearly inappropriate. Today, these actions go against the text of the Education Act, which states that children are not to be subjected to abusive treatment (SFS, 2010:800). Preschool teachers classifying such rough actions as inappropriate is also in line with the recognition of children's rights to physical integrity and dignity (Durrant, 2003; Durrant & Stewart-Tufescu, 2017) and reflects a view of the child as 'being'. Previously, however, there was greater acceptance for rough actions, according to the preschool teachers with extensive experience in the profession.

The educators deemed colleagues grabbing or restraining children as inappropriate behaviour. This could be a source of conflict according to some of the preschool teachers, who argued that colleagues could maintain that it was necessary for them to clearly guide the child by using some physical force. This highlights the point made by Månsson (2008) that becoming and being are perceptions of the child that may very well co-exist.

Touching children without asking or observing their signals is considered to imply a lack of respect for the children's integrity, which is not compatible with the view of children that should prevail in Swedish preschool today. Based on the view of the child as competent, or being, consideration must be given to the child's own feelings, needs and wishes (Halldén, 2007; James et al., 1998).

Furthermore, it is considered inappropriate for educators to dress children who can dress themselves or to carry children who can walk. This can also be linked to the view of children as competent 'beings' whose agency should not be undermined. The inappropriate actions of dressing children who can dress themselves and carrying children who can walk, typify educators who do not recognise children's competence and pursuit of independence. Scholars like Arneil (2002) have argued that there is a risk that seeing children as competent beings can mean that their need for care is neglected. In this study, however, dressing children who can dress themselves and unnecessarily carrying children who can walk is considered to be belittling to the children; and for the educators who have adopted the preschool's view of children as competent, this is the wrong way to act. That children are to become independent is fully in line with the preschool curriculum. The curriculum explicitly states that the preschool should provide each child with the conditions to develop 'independence and trust in their own ability' (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019, 14).



Moss and Dahlberg (2005) emphasise that guidelines, policy and curricula are one thing, but it is not certain that they always correspond to how educators understand how the preschool should be operated. The educators also create their own norms and informal guidelines. According to what we have found in this study, however, the informants' perception of appropriate and inappropriate touching is in agreement with the view of children stated in the curriculum and school law. The preschool teachers in this study can be said to agree about the inappropriateness of grabbing a child, restraining a child, touching a child without asking or observing the child's signals, and carrying or 'helping' a capable child.

Nevertheless, several of the preschool teachers also stressed that in practice it can be difficult to draw the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate touching. As exemplified in the quote from Kristina above, sometimes a gentle but determined touch can bring becoming and being children into close proximity to each other, to a point where these views are not discernible from one another. As Prout (2005) points out, these concepts reflect a dualistic way of thinking that does not always help our understanding.

When Kristina pondered the colleague's gentle but determined touch, she was balancing between different views, and she was left with the question: 'Are you allowed to do that?' In this situation, it is obvious that it can be hard to determine whether the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate touching has been crossed.

The last theme described above is kissing. Also, in this theme, it is obvious that the informants balanced between different and sometimes conflicting norms. Several of the preschool teachers stated definitely that kissing between educators and children should not occur. If it were to occur, it would be 'extremely unprofessional', as one informant claimed. Others described exceptions or situations when a single kiss may be appropriate. The educators hug the children, pat them, caress them and are physically close to them, but the overall rule seems to be that it is not really suitable to kiss the children. The preschool teachers' professional role has become clearer and more professional in recent decades (Tellgren, 2008), which may imply an influence on the view of kissing between educators and children. The informants drew a clear dividing line between the home and the preschool. This dividing line, at the same time, goes between the parents' relationship with their children and the educators' professional relationship with the children. The preschool teachers' view was that kissing does not belong in preschool, whereas, at the same time, out of respect for the children's wishes, exceptions are allowed.

## Conclusions

By analysing the informants' reflections on inappropriate touching through the lens of the child as becoming and being, we have highlighted touch as social and cultural practices of professional concern, rather than viewing them as questions about individuals' moral and psychological dispositions. This qualitative study comprised a small sample, and as such the findings cannot be generalised, nor should a comparison with preschools in other countries be made without great caution. Nevertheless, we believe that the results can be thought-provoking and that they can be used as a basis for reflection and discussion on how boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate touching is perceived in preschool. The results may be of interest to preschool teacher education as Swedish students argue that issues concerning touch are rarely addressed in teacher training (Hedlin, Åberg and Johansson, 2018). Emphatically, we would argue that our results should not be used to spur discussions in preschools on how to police preschool teachers' behaviour. Our study does not take a moral stand. Instead, by bringing teachers' perceptions to light, our hope is that it will become easier to treat the boundaries of touch, boundaries inevitably but not always consciously or verbally set in preschools, in a professional rather than moral manner. As emphasised by Svinth (2018), thus far, research on touch has been devoted to mapping the effects of touch for infants, with less attention being paid to relations between educators and children. Our study thus represents a contribution to this under-studied issue, and we suggest that more research be conducted on how educators balance their understandings and different views in relation to physical touching.

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