

# Fond touches from mum can make kid more socially attuned: Study

**Samantha Boh**

It is often said there is nothing quite like a mother's touch and science now says that that same touch could make a child more sociable.

Researchers at the National University of Singapore (NUS) have found that children who received more fond touches from their mothers were more socially attuned.

"For a long time, people believed there are no benefits from touch and that it is something we inherited from our evolutionary history, for things like grooming, and that touch in modern times is just a remnant of this," said Associate Professor Annett Schirmer from NUS' Department of Psychology, who supervised the research.

"But it seems we do have some evidence that maps on to what we find in the animal literature, that there is a relationship between social development and the amount of tactile stimulation that kids get when they are young," she said.

The study was published in the

journal *Cognitive Development* in July.

Prof Schirmer said previous research involving rodents found that offspring that were licked and groomed more by their mothers produced more of a certain neuropeptide responsible for many aspects of social behaviour, including love and trust.

These offspring were also more caring towards their own offspring later on.

The team wanted to find out if humans are also influenced socially by touch.

Over two years, they studied 39 mother-child pairs. The participants were made to engage in a 10-minute play session where the mother would tell a story to her child using some props.

The researchers recorded the number of times a mother purposefully touched her child, be it stroking or resting a hand on her child's arm.

After the session, the children, aged four to six years old, were separately given a social-orienting task



FOR SENIORS

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PROF ANNETT SCHIRMER

where they were shown shape outlines overlaid on an image meant to distract – either a face or a house.

They had to push the left button if they saw a circle on the left or the right button if they saw a circle on the right.

The data analysis found that they are more likely to be distracted by faces than by houses if their mother had touched them more during the play period.

What the research suggests is that the more the kids were touched, the more social they became as a consequence, said Prof Schirmer.

She believes a father's touch should elicit the same effect.

Prof Schirmer said that by extrapolation, this means kids who are touched more often are more likely to orientate towards other people in the environment. "So they are more likely to engage socially."

Research collaborators in Germany studying the same topic examined brain scans of children two weeks after they played with their mothers.

They found that those who were touched more often had stronger activity in the superior temporal sulcus. That's the hub for social perception, including the ability to understand facial expressions.

Moving forward, Prof Schirmer said she wants to study if the effect of maternal touch remains throughout one's lifetime, and if it is something that can be used to shape a

person's social abilities later in life.

"As people get older, they become socially more isolated and they might receive less touch. I am also wondering if one could institute tactile intervention to facilitate healthy ageing," she added.

Professor Michael Chee, director of the Centre for Cognitive Neuroscience at Duke-NUS Medical School, said the finding might be relevant in an era where Facetime and Skype are easily accessible.

Working mothers who travel use such technology to "stay in touch" without being physically present.

"This work suggests that such 'contact' (Facetime and Skype) could be insufficient to stimulate a young child's social development normatively," he said.

He added that more work needs to be done to test if this is indeed true but said "its implications on a society where a family of four can be having dinner at the same table but where everyone is texting someone else is sobering".

Prof Schirmer said mothers have often been discouraged from being too affectionate, like letting their child sleep with them, lest they spoil their child. While you would not want to overwhelm the child, she said there is nothing wrong with indulging them with cuddles.

"Don't think you need to somehow harden them for the world," she said.

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