

The Importance of Touching Stuff

Marc Armitage

Some years ago I related an observation made in a neighbourhood street in a paper I wrote for a conference. In front of me was a young man, of maybe four going five, who was walking along the footpath with a stick in one hand and his (what I presume) was his mothers in the other.

He reached a metal fence on his side of the path, one of those with upright iron bars with spikes on, and did exactly what you might expect a five year old with a stick in his hand to do – he started running it along the fence making a bumping, plinky, plonky noise. The adult with him subtly pulled him away from the fence. He momentarily lost his balance but once he'd recovered he put the stick back on the fence and carried on plinking and plonking.

Once again the adult pulled him away but this time stayed just far enough away to make it impossible for him to reach the fence. And this is when it got interesting because despite clearly being told twice (without a single word being used at any time) to 'stop it' he endeavoured to carry on, stretching his arm out and his stick as far as he could to try and make contact with the fence again.

He never did succeed even though he wound up leaning at a distinct angle away from his mother in the attempt. I couldn't see his face but I could image his tongue sticking out in concentration and effort.

At the time I wrote about this I was questioning what was going through the mind of the adult in this case. His need to touch this fence with his stick and go plink plonk was clearly very powerful and he made a big effort to continue doing it despite being physically restricted by his (presumed) mother.

The reason I mention this is because of something else I saw this morning, just now, in the local shopping centre buying the bread, bacon and milk that make Monday mornings bearable. In the centre there is a coffee shop which is currently closed and undergoing refurbishment and so is surrounded by one of those jolly shiny poster things that aims to say 'we are not closed really, honest ... opening again soon.'

As I was leaving the centre there was coming towards me another young man, this one maybe two going three, being pushed along in his pushchair by (what I also presumed) was his mother. As they passed the shiny poster thing he reached out to touch it ... but it was just that little bit too far away. The adult noticed this and what did she do? She steered the buggy inwards just far enough so that he COULD make contact with the shiny poster thing. He ran his hand along the entire length of that poster stroking every last bit of it and, at the very end, withdrew his hand and flashed a massive smile on his face.

I doubt very much whether the (presumed) mother with him realised the importance of what she had done in that very subtle little movement. It was clearly deliberate, as was the subtle movement in the first example that had had the opposite effect.

The need to touch stuff is clearly important for young children. Yes, it has a lot to do with sound and texture and all that but the bottom line is it's about the actual physical sensation of touching something and experiencing it through our body that makes it so powerful – it's a link between us and it.

And if the above examples teach us anything it is that providing for that to happen, or preventing it, takes just the same amount of subtle effort.

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