

Why you shouldn't force the kids to hug Granny at Christmas

December 20 2018, by Therese O'sullivan



A high-five might be a less confronting option for a child. Author provided

Granny, who lives interstate and whom the kids haven't seen since last

year, is visiting for Christmas. She loves the kids and is eager to scoop them up and smother them with kisses. The young children, who only have a vague memory of who she is, are wary and would rather keep an eye on this strange woman for the next few hours before committing to any physical contact.

Faced with this situation, many parents would instinctively tell their kids to remember their manners and allow themselves to be smothered by Granny (or Grandad). It's the polite thing to do, right? It is Christmas after all.

But in an era when we want [children](#) to be empowered, to be in charge of their bodies, and to be able to say no to unwanted attention, why do we allow our kids to be hugged and kissed against their will at family gatherings? Forced affection can undermine a child's inherent sense of stranger danger and self-trust.

Building and maintaining trust and respect are key to a successful relationship with children. The respectful approach to parenting (also known as "[educaring](#)") focuses on building cooperative relationships and treating each child as a unique human being.

Developed by Hungarian paediatrician [Emmi Pikler](#) and US parenting advocate [Magda Gerber](#), the goal of this approach is to aid the development of an "authentic" child. Authentic in this sense means a child who feels secure, independent, competent in their abilities, and connected to the people and the environment around them. This approach has been shown to benefit children and to promote a healthy relationship between [a child and their caregiver](#).

It is not an easy style of parenting. In many cases, it goes against how we ourselves were parented, and society's conventional expectations of what parenting involves. An obedient child who never questioned authority

was often viewed as a result of "good" parenting. In contrast, [a child's defiance](#) reflects their confidence to disagree, and is a normal and beneficial part of development.

Christmas presence

When it comes to Christmas [family gatherings](#), the respectful approach can include giving children information in advance, so they have an idea of what to expect.

Sitting down with your child and having a chat about where they will be going and who they will be meeting can help mentally prepare them for an upcoming event. Showing photos from previous years can also help them remember which relatives are which, thus helping them warm up for the impending meeting by putting a face to a name.

Likewise, letting relatives know in advance that your child will have a say in their greeting can help them prepare for the possibility of not getting the hug to which they might feel entitled. You can also suggest your relative give the child a choice of greeting (a hug, high-five, fist-bump, or wave).

The key to this process is to wait and hear the child's response – and, importantly, to respect their decision. This can be very hard – often the adult will feel disappointed and upset to realise the child does not want to hug them.

Letting children know that certain relatives may particularly like a hug can prepare them for that situation, while reassuring the child that they do have a say in the matter. You could try saying something like:
"Grandpa is really looking forward to seeing you! He'll ask you for a hug, but if you don't feel like it you don't have to. You might like to say hello in another way."

Children often relish the opportunity to exert some control. Autonomy is an important aspect of the respectful approach. For many children, it is their preference not to hug other people unless there is a close and connected relationship, and this should be fostered and supported. Occasionally, children may "test" the theory, by declining a hug and then waiting to see what happens.

As with adults, when their decision is respected, children feel more confident and valued. Over time, as a relationship becomes more familiar and connected, the child may feel more comfortable with closer contact.

For grandparents and other relatives, the [good news](#) is that this means when the [child](#) does agree to a hug (or even offers one of their own accord), it comes from a true desire to show affection, rather than from an adult imposing their wishes on them.

Incorporating aspects of the [respectful approach into your Christmas](#) can help your children feel more settled and secure, at what is often a hectic time of the year.

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