

Never Underestimate the Healing in A Hug

By Jim Stinson, Consultant for Older Adult Ministries

Benjamin is grandpa's favorite four-year old! Others may think their four-year-old grandson is wonderful, but this grandpa knows his Benjamin is truly wonderful and wonder filled, never failing to remind me just why he is.

When I came to his home the other night for an overnight babysitting stint with him and his equally wonderful sister and brother, he almost bowled me over. He had heard my voice and came running to see me and give me the customary greeting—a hug and a kiss. In that moment, all the cares of a busy day tumbled away. Any concerns I had seemed suddenly unimportant.

There is something magically healing about such moments! Little children have no compunction about expressing their love. It is boundless, non-judgmental, and expressed in very physical ways. I used to think that the bumper sticker asking, "Have you hugged your child today" was a reminder of how important it is to let your child know in a visible, tangible way that you care. It is more than that! It is a reminder of the importance of a touch, of physical contact, of connecting words with actions. As such it builds self-assurance in the child. This building of self-assurance is a two-way street. It is not only "cool" to be greeted so warmly. It is reassuring both to the giver and to the recipient.

The proverbial hug is loaded with potential! I want to create a new bumper sticker that asks, "Have you hugged your older adult today?" Each day, in my capacity as director of Spiritual Life for the United Methodist Homes, I become ever more convinced that this segment of our population often doesn't get the hugs it needs. They are often not touched in tangible, physical ways.

We've seen studies that demonstrate children who spend their early days and months without physical contact from caring individuals suffer more often than other children from 'failure to thrive' syndrome. Older adults often have the same response. They fail to thrive physically, emotionally and spiritually, having lost the self-assurance so vital to full living. Much time and attention goes into meeting their physical needs, yet the simplest physical need of being 'touched' goes unattended.

What a gift we bring to our older adult ministries when we find creative ways to offer "hugs" to those with whom and to whom we minister. Worship, especially the sacrament of communion, offers the opportunity to linger an extra moment as we place the bread in the hands of the one receiving. The passing of the peace during our services offers the same possibility, as does holding hands as we pray, or a hug when coming or going (if the relationship allows it). Social events are ripe with appropriate opportunities! Rather than passing a tray with goodies, why not place the goodies in the hands? Rather than walking an older adult to wherever they are going, why not offer an arm or a hand? The list is endless. There are countless ways to reach out and touch an older adult in appropriate, reassuring, comforting, life enhancing ways.

Be creative, but be sure to "Hug an older adult today."