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School puts the squeeze on hugs

Students uncomfortable with long embraces prompt officials to clarify what's appropriate and what's not.

By Ann Schrader
The Denver Post

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Hugging that made some Evergreen Middle School students uncomfortable has led school officials to send home letters outlining the differences between friendly and threatening behavior.

"In many areas of our culture, hugging is completely appropriate and welcomed," said the first letter, dated Friday. "Unfortunately, some of our students were taking hugging a bit too far."

Principal Jane Sutera said in the letter that students reported to administrators they felt "pressured and uncomfortable" when other students hugged them in a prolonged way and didn't know how to stop it.

Other behaviors of concern are bullying, name-calling, harassing other students, "pecking order" behaviors, too much public display of affection, random touching and inappropriate attire, the letter said.

Your Thoughts

Discuss: What do you think of the move by some schools to limit hugging between students? Tell us in West Watch.

Another letter was sent Tuesday in which Sutera, who is out of town, clarified what is considered inappropriate hugging.

"It is normal behavior for children to express their emotion by embracing each other," the letter said. "Brief, friendly hugs are acceptable as well as high-fives and handshakes.

"What is not allowed are prolonged embraces between students that may be considered sexual harassment," the letter stated.

District Superintendent Cindy Stevenson said, "I don't think it's a serious problem. We had some girls who were pretty upset by some of the behaviors. It's middle school, and we have to teach the kids what is appropriate behavior and what is inappropriate behavior."

Expected behaviors outlined in Tuesday's letter include:

Appropriate interactions - no bullying, harassment and intimidation. This behavior can be direct or indirect such as cutting in line at lunch, superior attitudes and put-downs.

Appropriate conversations - no name calling, slang terms or cursing.

Appropriate dress - outlined in the student

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handbook, which states clothing should not distract from the educational environment.

Appropriate touching - no grabbing, inappropriate or prolonged hugging, slapping, back rubbing, pushing or inappropriate public displays of affection.

While Denver psychologist Stephanie Smith is not familiar with the Evergreen situation, she said middle-school students try out different things and find out "what works and what doesn't."

Physical contact is part of learning where to draw the line "when one feels comfortable or violated in some way," Smith said.

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