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For Teenagers, Hello Means ‘How About a Hug?’

By [SARAH KERSHAW](#)



There is so much hugging at Pascack Hills High School in Montvale, N.J., that students have broken down the hugs by type:

There is the basic friend hug, probably the most popular, and the bear hug, of course. But now there is also the bear claw, when a boy embraces a girl awkwardly with his elbows poking out.

There is the hug that starts with a high-five, then moves into a fist bump, followed by a slap on the back and an embrace.

There's the shake and lean; the hug from behind; and, the newest addition, the triple — any combination of three girls and boys hugging at once.

“We're not afraid, we just get in and hug,” said Danny Schneider, a junior at the school, where hallway hugging began shortly after 7 a.m. on a recent morning as students arrived. “The guy friends, we don't care. You just get right in there and jump in.”

There are romantic hugs, too, but that is not what these teenagers are talking about.

Girls embracing girls, girls embracing boys, boys embracing each other — the hug has become the favorite social greeting when teenagers meet or part these days. Teachers joke about “one hour” and “six hour” hugs, saying that students hug one another all day as if they were separated for the entire summer.

A measure of how rapidly the ritual is spreading is that some students complain of peer pressure to hug to fit in. And schools from Hillsdale, N.J., to Bend, Ore., wary in a litigious era about sexual harassment or improper touching — or citing hallway clogging and late arrivals to class — have banned hugging or imposed a three-second rule.

Parents, who grew up in a generation more likely to use the handshake, the low-five or the high-five, are often baffled by the close physical contact. “It's a wordless custom, from what I've observed,” wrote Beth J. Harpaz, the mother of two boys, 11 and 16, and a parenting columnist for The Associated Press, in a new book, “13 Is the New 18.”

“And there doesn't seem to be any other overt way in which they acknowledge knowing each other,” she continued, describing the scene at her older son's school in Manhattan. “No hi, no smile, no wave, no high-five — just the hug. Witnessing this interaction always makes me feel like I am a tourist in a country where I do not know the customs and cannot speak the language.”

For teenagers, though, hugging is hip. And not hugging?

“If somebody were to not hug someone, to never hug anybody, people might be just a little wary of them and

think they are weird or peculiar,” said Gabrielle Brown, a freshman at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School in Manhattan.

Comforting as the hug may be, principals across the country have clamped down. “Touching and physical contact is very dangerous territory,” said Noreen Hajinlian, the principal of George G. White School, a junior high school in Hillsdale, N.J., who banned hugging two years ago. “It was needless hugging — they are in the hallways before they go to class. It wasn’t a greeting. It was happening all day.”

Schools that have limited hugging invoked longstanding rules against public displays of affection, meant to maintain an atmosphere of academic seriousness and prevent unwanted touching, or even groping.

But pro-hugging students say it is not a romantic or sexual gesture, simply the “hello” of their generation. “We like to get cozy,” said Katie Dea, an eighth grader at Claire Lilienthal Alternative School in San Francisco. “The high-five is, like, boring.”

Some sociologists said that teenagers who grew up in an era of organized play dates and close parental supervision are more cooperative with one another than previous generations — less cynical and individualistic and more loyal to the group.

But Amy L. Best, a sociologist at George Mason University, said the teenage embrace is more a reflection of the overall evolution of the American greeting, which has become less formal since the 1970s. “Without question, the boundaries of touch have changed in American culture,” she said. “We display bodies more readily, there are fewer rules governing body touch and a lot more permissible access to other people’s bodies.”

Hugging appears to be a grass-roots phenomenon and not an imitation of a character or custom on TV or in movies. The prevalence of boys’ nonromantic hugging (especially of other boys) is most striking to adults. Experts say that over the last generation, boys have become more comfortable expressing emotion, as embodied by the [MTV](#) show “Bromance,” which is now a widely used term for affection between straight male friends.

But some sociologists pointed out that African-American boys and men have been hugging as part of their greeting for decades, using the word “dap” to describe a ritual involving handshakes, slaps on the shoulders and, more recently, a hug, also sometimes called the gangsta hug among urban youth.

“It’s something you grow up doing,” said Mazi Chiles, a junior at South Gwinnett High School in Snellville, Ga., who is black. “But you don’t come up to a dude and hug, you start out with a handshake.”

Some parents find it paradoxical that a generation so steeped in hands-off virtual communication would be so eager to hug.

“Maybe it’s because all these kids do is text and go on [Facebook](#) so they don’t even have human contact anymore,” said Dona Eichner, the mother of freshman and junior girls at the high school in Montvale.

She added: “I hug people I’m close to. But now you’re hugging people you don’t even know. Hugging used to mean something.”

There are, too, some young critics of hugging.

Amy Heaton, a freshman at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Bethesda, Md., said casual social hugging seemed disingenuous to her. “Hugging is more common in my opinion in people who act like friends,” she said. “It’s like air-kissing. It’s really superficial.”

But Carrie Osbourne, a sixth-grade teacher at Claire Lilienthal Alternative School, said hugging was a powerful and positive sign that children are inclined to nurture one another, breaking down barriers. “And it gets to that core that every person wants to feel cared for, regardless of your age or how cool you are or how cool you think you are,” she said.

As much as hugging is a physical gesture, it has migrated online as well. Facebook applications allowing friends to send hugs have tens of thousands of fans. Katie Dea, the San Francisco eighth grader, as well as Olivia Brown, 11, who lives in Manhattan and is the younger sister of Gabrielle, the LaGuardia High freshman, have a new sign-off for their text and e-mail messages: *hug.*