
The legacy of preterm birth: An investigation into touch attitudes and experiences

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Abstract

Survival rates of infants born pre-term have increased but neurodevelopmental disabilities and poor mental health are common outcomes. This may in part be due to atypical sensory experiences during critical early stages of neurodevelopment, as repeated exposure to noxious stimuli is a risk factor for dysregulated neuroendocrine responses to stress. Evidence points to the critical role of touch in supporting physiological stability and healthy neuro-behavioural development. However, tactile stimulation, while present in utero, is notably absent for a preterm infant in an incubator. This study explored if being born preterm alters adults' perception of social touch and how this relates to self-reported social and emotional processing. Ninety-two participants (mean age 38.76 +/- 11.89, 62 women) were recruited, with 47 born preterm (before 37 weeks) and 45 born full-term. Self-reported levels of depression, stress, and autistic traits were measured, along with participants' experiences of and attitudes towards touch. In line with previous research, adults born pre-term reported significantly higher levels of depression, stress, and autistic traits than adults born full-term. Moreover, while groups did not differ in experienced levels of childhood touch or attitudes to self-care, the adults born pre-term experienced significantly lower levels of, and reported more negative attitudes towards, social touch than the group born full term. While higher levels of intimate touch predicted lower levels of depression, no interaction was found between groups. This suggests, social touch is beneficial in both groups, yet less sought and experienced by adults born pre-term.

Keywords: Affective touch, Adults born preterm, depression, attitudes towards touch

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