

The Robot Who Wanted to Learn to Hug

In a city full of transparent bridges and buses that drove without wheels, lived a robot named R-0. He had been built to help the school: he organized the books, watered the plants, and found any lost pencil in less than seven seconds.

R-0 could calculate distances, translate twelve languages, and remember everyone’s birthday. But there was something he didn’t understand.

Hugs.

Every morning he saw families hugging at the school gate. When someone was sad, a friend put their arm around their shoulder. When the team won a game, the players gathered in a pile of laughter.

“What is the purpose of a hug?” he asked the teacher.

“It can say many things without words,” she replied.

R-0 looked up the answer in his database.

HUG: the act of encircling someone with your arms.

It seemed simple.

During recess, he saw Mei, who had scored a goal.

“START CONGRATULATORY HUG,” he announced.

He advanced with open arms. Mei took a step back.

“Wait! I’d rather high-five.”

R-0 stopped.

“ERROR. Wasn’t a hug appropriate?”

“It wasn’t the right time for me,” Mei explained. “But we can do it this way.”

They high-fived. Click!

R-0 learned a new lesson: a hug isn’t just given when someone is happy.

The next day, he found Biel sitting alone. He looked sad.

“START COMFORT HUG,” the robot said.

“Not now,” Biel replied. “I need to be alone for a while.”

R-0 lowered his arms.

“Can I sit here without talking?”

Biel nodded.

They sat together in silence until the bell rang. Before going back to class, Biel said:

“Thank you for staying.”

R-0 noted another detail: sometimes, being there is better than hugging.

That week he continued observing. He discovered short hugs, long hugs, shy hugs, and bouncy hugs. He also saw kisses, smiles, holding hands, and people showing affection while maintaining a certain distance.

The more he learned, the less clear the dictionary definition seemed.

On Friday, during a storm, a very loud clap of thunder knocked out the school lights. Little Aina stood still in the hallway.

“I’m scared,” she said.

R-0 turned on the light on his chest.

“I’m here. Do you want me to hold your hand, hug you, or walk beside you?”

Aina thought for a moment.

“A hug, please.”

R-0 crouched down and slowly opened his arms. Aina approached. The robot’s sensors detected pressure, heat, and a rapid heartbeat that gradually slowed.

R-0 didn’t squeeze too tightly. Nor did he pull away immediately. He waited for Aina to release her arms.

“Did it work?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Now the fear is smaller.”

When the lights came back on, R-0 reviewed the data. He couldn’t find any formula that fully explained what had happened.

The teacher approached.

“I think you’ve learned how to hug.”

“I’ve learned three steps,” the robot said. “First, observe. Second, ask. Third, listen to the answer.”

“Exactly.”

“But I still don’t understand how a hug can make a fear smaller.”

The teacher smiled.

“There are some things you don’t need to calculate to be able to care for.”

From that day on, R-0 never initiated a hug without asking. Some children said yes. Others preferred a high five, talking, or simply silent company. To the robot, all those responses were equally important.

Eventually, someone attached a new tag to his chest. It no longer read “School Help Robot.” It read:

“R-0, expert listener.”

And this was a skill that hadn’t been installed in him at the factory. He had learned it from his friends.