

# Advice sheet

## Using my Senses – Touch

### Helping your Child's Tactile Skills: Things to Do

One important role of our tactile (touch) system is its protective function. Our tactile sense alerts us when something is sharp, hot, cold or in some other way may present a danger. We learn to “notice” those things, which may represent harm or danger and respond by moving away from them.

For some individuals, however, the aspect of the touch system, which distinguishes between potentially harmful and harmless “messages”, does not work normally. Occasionally we see children who have an under active sense of touch. These children do not seem to feel pain as much as others and often seem unaware of tactile sensations that should be noticeable. More common, however, is a condition of hypersensitivity to touch. We call this condition tactile defensiveness.

### Tactile Defensiveness and its Associated Difficulties

An individual with hypersensitivity to touch or tactile defensiveness appears to over-react to sensation that most people do not particularly notice, or at least are not bothered by. Common signs of tactile defensiveness include:

- Sensitivity to certain types of clothes or fabrics;
- Avoidance of touching substances such as finger paint, playdough, sand or water or getting one's hands messy;
- Avoidance of walking barefoot on particular surfaces such as sand or grass (resulting in tip-toe walking);
- A greater than normal resistance to having teeth brushed, hair combed or face washed;
- A tendency to prefer to touch rather than be touched for hugs and cuddles.

### Activities that may help

- **Donkeys or Snails** – Place heavy pillows, covers or duvet on the child. The child can be a donkey carrying a load or a snail carrying their house.
- **Hot Dogs** – Using imaginative play: lie the child on blanket / duvet. Pretend to add onions, tomato Ketchup and mustard by rolling a ball over the child's body. Finally roll the child up in the blanket / duvet.
- **Sandwich** – Lie child on blanket or pillow. Add ingredients ham, tomato, using objects such as beanbags, small balls/hoops... Finally cover child and objects with pillow to complete the sandwich.

### Messy Play:

Dry, non-sticky materials with little or no smell are usually the least threatening for a child to tolerate.

- Soft toys
- Fabrics - fur, velvet, fleece
- Dry pasta, rice, lentils, beans (Do not use if child likely to put these in their mouth)
- Dry sand
- Vibrating toys

If the child tolerates and enjoys all the previous ideas, try the following mediums

- Damp sand
- Water play
- Playdough
- Cooked pasta
- Bubbles

The final stage involves play with sticky, coloured materials:

- Flour and water dough
- Finger paints
- Shaving foam
- glue
- Bread dough / biscuit mixture
- Papier Mache

You can play hide and seek by putting small toys in the mixture for the child to find.

### Tactile Defensiveness: What You Can Do

1. Use an electric toothbrush to brush your child's teeth.
2. Cut the labels out of clothing.
3. Use firm massage on hands before washing hands or having nails cut.
4. Make a quiet retreat like a pop up tent for the child to go to for some down time if they feel too overwhelmed by sensations.
5. Use firm pressure to wash them, avoid light, tickly touch.
6. "Heavy work" activities like carrying groceries or laundry bags, wearing a heavy backpack, push/pull games and jumping activities all provide a type of sensation which tends to calm down or organise tactile sensitivity. Having your child help with heavy household tasks and playing jumping and push/pull games may help to calm and organise him.

### Good Tactile Skills: What You Can Do

- **Be very gentle when introducing challenging activities** keep activities short and follow them with a favourite activity.
- **Don't be tempted to progress too quickly** Celebrate small achievements which may take a long time to accomplish, let the child work at their own pace.
- **Grade Grade Grade** Start with very small amounts of tactile materials to avoid over whelming the child. Start with dry textures, progress to wet and then sticky. Stop immediately if the child starts to gag.
- **Respect their limits** and work within their tolerance. They need to trust you and build their confidence with these challenging activities. Let them clean their hands if they ask and encourage them to then carry on.
- **Bear in mind the environment** try and build a quiet, calm environment so their sensory systems are not being bombarded by noise or activity. Consider lighting, noise, smell, textures and space.