

# Talking Matters

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Helping your child to reach their potential



## Responding to tactile input (touch)

Our tactile system is our sense of touch, which we gain through different receptors in our skin. The ability to interpret tactile information is important to our safety as it can alert us when something is unpleasant or dangerous. We are always actively touching or passively being touched.



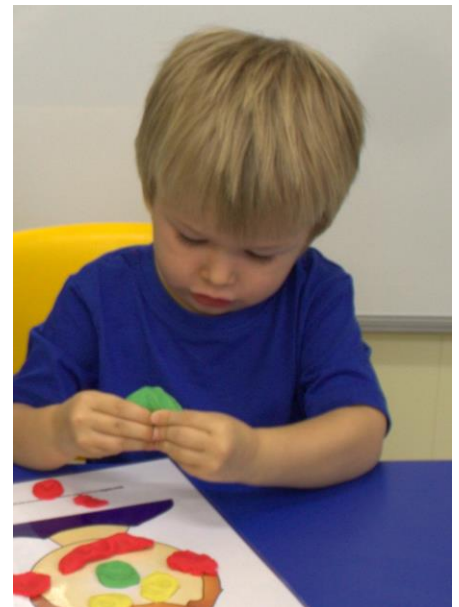
**Tactile stimulation can be in form of light touch, deep pressure, skin stretch, vibration, movement, itch, temperature and pain.**

**Light touch** is transmitted to the brain faster and is often over stimulating and disorganising. **Firm touch** is transmitted to the brain slower and is often less stimulating and more calming.

**For some children, their tactile system is not working normally** and they may perceive safe touch as scary or uncomfortable. This is called tactile defensiveness. In other cases, children may be less aware of touch and touch things more than others without being aware they are doing it. This is called being tactile seeking.

Children who experience **tactile defensiveness** may find the following strategies helpful:

- ☺ Talk your child through what a texture is going to feel like before expecting them to touch it. This will reduce anxiety about touching it.
- ☺ If your child is anxious they are likely to be more sensitive to touch e.g. soft spikes may feel like razors. It is important to ensure your child is feeling calm and ready to touch new textures.
- ☺ Giving your child opportunities for proprioception (through deep pressure or movement activities) before doing a tactile activity will reduce their sensitivity towards the texture.
- ☺ Slowly work towards introducing new textures to your child by giving them a range of textured objects of a similar type.
- ☺ Use firm pressure when touching your child such as giving bear hugs rather than light cuddles. Avoid using light touch e.g. pats on the head, shoulder or back. Always tell your child when you are going to touch them. Never surprise them or approach them from behind.
- ☺ Your child may prefer to go first or last in line, and hold their partner at their wrist to avoid light touch from others.



- ☺ Dress your child in tight fitting long sleeve clothes where appropriate to avoid things brushing past their skin. Avoid tags and rough fabrics.
- ☺ Try to gradually incorporate a variety of tactile experiences into play, so that your child can initiate touch themselves, rather than being forced.

Children who are **tactile seeking** may find the following strategies helpful in their day to day life:

- ☺ Attach different textured fabrics to the bottom of the child's school desk for them to fiddle with e.g. artificial grass, satin or corduroy.
- ☺ Textured weighted lap cushions with different fiddle toys attached are a great idea for circle time. If the toys are attached your child will not be able to throw or bounce it around the room.
- ☺ Giving your child opportunities for proprioception (through deep pressure or movement activities) will reduce your child's need to seek out tactile sensation.
- ☺ Practice touching hard and soft. Some hard touch is okay, but your child may need to ask first e.g. giving massages. Some soft touch is okay, depending where on the body. Teach your child about 'safe hands' rather than using the words 'no hitting' as your child may not be aware how hard they touched the other person.
- ☺ Teach your child where it is appropriate and inappropriate to touch. Back, arms, hands and shoulders are usually okay places to touch others to get their attention. Chest, head, face and crotch are not okay places to touch to get others' attention.
- ☺ Verbalise when you see your child touching things to bring their attention to it, and where necessary direct them to something more appropriate they can touch.

### Activity Ideas:

Here are some suggestions for introducing children to tactile based activities in less intrusive ways for children who are **tactile defensive**.

- ☺ Try drawing in shaving cream, sand, dirt, corrugated cardboard, plastacine, or sandpaper with a paintbrush or pencil before trying with fingers. This will help your child identify the texture without the mess on their hands.
- ☺ Have them put on gloves before exploring with their fingers through water beads, rice or soy beans.
- ☺ To avoid anxiety related to splashing, give your child full control over water activities. Have a towel ready to dry their hands straight away and plan the rules before playing.



- ☺ During bathing, let your child wash their own head and hair with a flannel rather than tipping water over their head.
- ☺ Let your child feel the texture on their forearm before touching it to their fingertips. The forearm has much fewer tactile receptors than the fingertips, and so will be less sensitive to the texture.
- ☺ Have reduced time expectations of how long your child will play with a texture for. Follow up by giving them deep pressure through squeezing their hands and arms before suggesting they try again.



Below are a number of activities that will expose children to a variety of tactile inputs for those who are **tactile seeking**.

- ☺ Drawing or writing in different textures such as shaving cream, sand or dirt.
- ☺ Hiding objects in different textures such as water beads, rice or soy beans.
- ☺ Water play with cups, straws, spoons or graters. Take turns to pour the water using the objects over each other's hands and feet.
- ☺ Place objects in your child's hands while they are blindfolded and get them to guess what they are.
- ☺ Colour in a shapes with a vibrating pen.
- ☺ Massage each other's hands, arms, body, head, legs and feet with a handheld vibrating massager.
- ☺ Complete finger, hand or foot paintings.
- ☺ Have a water gun, water balloon or spray bottle fight in the backyard.
- ☺ Do some cooking and have the child involved in mixing the ingredients with their hands.
- ☺ Make slime with corn flour and food colouring.

For more information or to explore your child's tactile processing needs, book an appointment with an occupational therapist.

