

# The Touch System

## (Tactile System)

Our touch system allows us make sense of our physical and emotional environment. It keeps us safe and allows us to form attachments and communicate. We have touch receptors all over our body and in our mouth, which sense temperature, pain, pressure and movement.



Your local  
healthcare  
provider

### Touch Hypersensitivity

A child who is hypersensitive to touch may find a number of textures overwhelming and light touch maybe too much for them to tolerate.

Some behaviours that maybe seen include:

- Becomes upset by light touch
- Dislikes having dirty hands or skin, they may avoid unfamiliar textures or activities such as messy play
- Sensitivity and dislike for certain clothing, seams/tags in clothing
- Will seek out more personal space than typical of another child their age and may become upset if this is invaded by others
- Avoidance of and becoming upset during personal care tasks, such as washing and dressing
- Uses finger tips to complete activities, rather than their whole hand

### Strategies for a child sensitive to touch:

Although a child may be sensitive to touch, deep pressure touch can be easier to tolerate and can even be calming/soothing for some, due to its effect on the nervous system. Commonly used deep pressure activities include:

- Having a massage, including pressing through shoulders
- Bear hugs
- Hugging a pet
- Weighted products, such as blankets, lap pads, weighted cuddly toys, weighted vests (these have associated risks, please seek manufacturer guidelines and never use unsupervised)
- Carrying a backpack (see weighted backpack guidelines, always use 10% of bodyweight)

### Classroom strategies:

- Position the student at the front/end of any line up to avoid unnecessary touch
- Allow the student to have a larger 'personal bubble'
- Position coat hook/water bottle at the end of collection point, or allow to collect prior to other students
- Allow the student to engage in heavy work tasks such as wiping down the blackboard, cleaning desks, running errands between learning tasks
- Make allowances for sensitivity to clothing – remove tags

### Touch Under-responsivity:

A child with touch under-responsivity may disregard touch, whether this is soothing or painful. Common indicators that a child is touch under-responsive are:

- Doesn't notice if too hot or too cold and may dress inappropriately for the temperature
- Not being aware that clothing is twisted or too tight
- Unaware of hands, face other body parts wet or dirty
- Frequently touching objects, surfaces or people to the point of irritating others
- Overgripping or holding a pencil/ handwriting pen too loose
- Unconcerned or unaware when injured



# The Touch System

## (Tactile System)

### Strategies and activities for building tactile responsiveness:

- Chair push ups
- Stretch breaks
- Bouncing on mini trampoline or gym ball
- Scented playdough or theraputty
- Write letters in shaving foam or sand
- Use fidgets
- Use pencil grips

### Touch Discrimination:

Some children will have difficulty identifying where specifically on their bodies they are experiencing touch sensations, especially if they are unable to see who/what is touching them. Your child may also be confused by different touch sensations i.e. whether touch pressure is hard or gentle and difficulty identifying what they are touching if they can't see the object. The impact of sensory discrimination difficulties can be confusion and distress.



### Strategies to support touch discrimination skills:

- Avoid surprising your child with unexpected touch
- Tell your child in advance that you need to make physical contact and be specific about where on their body i.e. I'm going to put my hands on your head or shoulder to help you brush your hair
- Practice doing puzzles
- Create a fun 'what's in the bag' guessing game. Create a bag which contains everyday objects that your child uses such as a hairbrush, toothbrush, spoon, toy car, play vegetables, play food or money. Encourage your child to use both hands to explore shapes and textures without looking at them. You can increase the complexity of this game by putting objects in a bag containing sand, dried pasta or rice for example.
- Ask your child to describe and compare the feel of different objects or textures and recognisable objects

With a gentle and consistent approach it is possible to build up tolerance to touch and a greater awareness of touch by following the suggestions above.