Overcoming Tactile Defensiveness

Community Paediatric Occupational Therapy Department
www.abm.wales.nhs.uk/childrensdevelopment
Introduction

This advice sheet provides practical advice for parents and schools who want to help children who are tactile defensive.

Tactile defensiveness is an aversion to non-harmful touch, such as craft materials (glue, paint, sand etc), food, certain types of clothes and having a wash. Your child may become upset or aggressive in response to certain types of touch. Because of this they can be easily distracted and may have difficulties paying attention.

Children with tactile defensiveness also may have difficulties with co-ordination because they do not have a good understanding of how objects feel. Some children may want to touch everything, or seem to hold things with too much force.

The following types of sensory input are calming to our systems, and may help your child cope with defensiveness to touch:

- **Slow rhythmic movement** such as swinging or rocking in one direction i.e. back and forth or side to side.
- **Deep pressure** to muscles and joints e.g. massage or firm squeezing.
- **Proprioceptive activities** i.e. those that include heavy work to muscles, traction or compression through joints, or strong contraction of muscles around joints.

Strategies to cope with tactile defensiveness

At snack and mealtimes

- Massage the child’s arms and hands before meals, or encourage them to do this to themselves.
- Encourage oral-motor play before meals with non-food items e.g. blowing bubbles, biting hard on oral toys.
- Encourage the child to chew on ice before and during a meal if you are trying a different flavour or texture as this may reduce the sensitivity in their mouth.
- Experiment with different types and weights of cutlery, especially those which are heavier.
When dressing

- Massage the child’s limbs before dressing, or encourage them to do this to themselves.
- Ensure labels and tags are removed if these irritate the child.
- Wear socks inside out to reduce irritation from seams.
- Help the child to avoid becoming too hot.
- Try firm fitting or tight clothes e.g. Lycra, which may be less uncomfortable than loose fitting shirts.

When bathing

- Give your child a heavy rub down before and after a bath.
- Experiment with different textured cloths e.g. flannel, sponge, loofer and encourage the child to wash themselves with whatever textured cloth they prefer.
- See if the child prefers showers or baths and think about the pressure of the water falling on the child.
- Wrap the child tightly after a bath or shower.
- Apply any lotions firmly and encourage the child to apply these themselves as they get older.

When brushing teeth

- Try using an electric toothbrush or different textures brushes.
- Encourage your child to brush his tongue and the insides of his cheeks to reduce the sensitivity in their mouth.

Sleeping

- Provide deep pressure and slow regular rhythms before bed e.g. firm hugs and rocking in a chair.
- Try a sleeping bag or heavy blanket as the added weight provides deep pressure which can be calming.

At school

- Encourage the child to stand/walk at the end of the line.
- Allocate a coat peg at the end of the row.
- Allow the child to leave class 5 minutes early to get to their next lesson.
- Request that they help carry/hand out heavy books or objects.
- Sit them next to a quieter pupil that doesn’t fidget a lot.
• Encourage the child to sit on a beanbag e.g. at story time.
• Provide an object to fiddle with/squeeze in class.
• Prepare the child’s body prior to any messy play activities using proprioceptive and deep pressure activities e.g. desk push ups, making a firm fist with the hands and releasing, pushing hands together in a prayer position, pressing thumb and finger tips together firmly, squeezing a ball etc.
• Modify art activities to reduce the tactile input e.g. use of rolling pin with play dough, use of a paintbrush/other tools when using paint.
• Allow the child to wash their hands e.g. at sink or have a bowl of water next to them during very messy activities.
• Encourage the child to help get out/put away P.E equipment.
• Incorporate rolling/crawling/pulling/pushing games into P.E.

“Heavy Work” activities that can be calming to nervous system
Doing these types of activities regularly throughout the day, and particularly just before an activity the child finds difficult may help prepare the child to cope with the sensation of touch:

• Rough and tumble play.
• Pushing and pulling games such as tug-o-war, hand to hand in sitting, kneeling or standing to “row the boat”.
• Monkey bars, trapeze, climbing frames, adventure playgrounds.
• Sit on a piece of strong fabric on a slippery floor surface such as line or polished wood. Use a piece of rope to pull the child with.
• Everyday activities e.g. vacuuming, pushing supermarket trolley, digging and raking, moving heavy furniture etc.
• Wheelbarrow walks.
• Vibrating pens and toys.
• Jumping off something high to land on something soft.
• “Hotdog” e.g. roll the child up in a duvet and give them pressure with therapy ball (or your hands) down their back, arms and legs.
• Catching and throwing heavy sandbags, beanbags, balls.
• Trampolining.
• Squashing yourself into the floor - encourage your child to place the palms of his hands on the top of his head and press down for 25 seconds.
• Squashy ball - encourage your child to hold the ball between two flat hands in front of the chest. Squash the ball hard to try and keep it flattened.
• Strong Man press-ups - child lies on their tummy on the floor and pushes up through his outstretched arms. Try doing press-ups against the wall or down on a desk.
• Row the Boat - use a skipping rope, or hold hands. Sit facing your child with feet outstretched and touching. Do controlled push and pull movements like a rowing exercise.
• Bear Hugs - combine your bear hugs with gentle rocking back and forth for extra calming effect.
