



EXPLORE THE SENSE OF TOUCH©

By Zoe Mailloux, OTD, OTR/L, FAOTA

The sense of touch (or tactile sensory perception) is one of our most important senses. It begins to develop very early during pregnancy and becomes quite active long before a baby is born. Like the other senses that play an important role in sensory integration, it usually goes about doing its job without us noticing very much. Yet it is very important for allowing us to perform many skills and to feel comfortable and at ease in many situations. Babies learn a lot about the world through the sense of touch. When they go through the stage of picking up and putting everything in their mouths they are using their sense of touch to find out about shape, size and texture. This is how they first learn about the difference between things like round and square, big and little, rough and smooth, etc. If the sense of touch is not very specific, that is, it doesn't provide clear, consistent information, then it may be more difficult to understand these types of differences visually or cognitively. The hands, feet and mouth are the most sensitive areas of our bodies because they have many more cells which detect and respond to touch. We depend on information from our touch system to help us perform many skills.

Touch As Feedback

Think about how hard it is to do anything with gloves on. Your muscles still work the same way, but you have reduced "feedback" from your sense of touch. Think now of all the intricate tasks done by using your sense of touch, without looking -- finding a dime in the bottom of a pocket, buttoning a button on the back of a shirt, cracking a sunflower seed and removing the seed with your tongue -- all day long, one after the other, we rely on our sense of touch to perform everyday tasks without giving it a second thought. How would you do these things if your sense of touch did not help very much? How much longer would it take you to do things if you had to stop and look at everything, or if you had to think about everything, you were going to do with your hands. This happens to many children who are not able to rely on their sense of touch. It can be frustrating and confusing.

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Try These Touch Activities

If a child has poor or inconsistent touch perception, one aim of therapy is to help this function to work more efficiently. We might use many different therapeutic activities to work on this. Here are some things you can do at home to help a child whose sense of touch is less than optimal, or who might benefit from enhanced touch feedback:

1. Play hide and find games with objects hidden in dried beans or rice. Choose objects with which your child is familiar, and see if he can identify objects by touch alone. If your child is not verbal, have her match simple shapes (Example: place a coin, a block and a ball on the table. Say, "When you find one of these, show it to me.")
2. Play games where you ask the child to describe an object being felt without looking at it. You can keep the ideas simple, such as "round" "cold" or "wet" or more complex, such as a "long, smooth, pointed object."
3. Have objects with different textures available for play and help your child discriminate between soft and hard, rough and scratchy, bumpy and smooth, etc. Talk about these differences and see if your child can distinguish them through touch.
4. Have your child identify shapes (or letters and numbers if your child is at this level) that are drawn on their back or on their hands. You can play this game in the bathtub and draw through soap foam or shaving cream so they can see the shape after they have tried to guess.
5. Have your child draw simple lines, shapes, letters or numbers with their fingers in substances such as sand, play-doh, soap foam, pudding, etc. The extra sensation may help them get the idea of the shape or letter.
6. Think about ways to involve novel tactile experiences during play and daily activities. For example, crawling through tunnels, climbing over cushions or rolling in blankets/cloths of various textures; adding shaving cream to a small pool "slip and slide"; making fun cooking activities that involve forming dough with the hands; adding cloths, sponges, loofas and scrubs to bath time; getting "buried" in the sand at the beach, etc.

These are just a few ideas. Try to think about your own sense of touch and incorporate tactile discrimination games and tactile activities into your child's play in a fun and non-stressful way.

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