

TACTILE DEFENSIVENESS: SOME PEOPLE ARE MORE SENSITIVE ©

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In addition to the important role of our touch (or tactile) system previously discussed under tactile perception, another critical aspect of this sense 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 underactive 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 inconsistent responsiveness or hypersensitivity to touch. Dr. A. Jean Ayres was the first to describe this condition as "tactile defensiveness." An individual with hypersensitivity to touch or tactile defensiveness appears to overreact to sensation that most people might not particularly notice, or at least are not bothered by. Common signs of tactile defensiveness include: sensitivity to certain types of clothes or fabrics; preference or aversion to foods which seems most related to the texture of the food (e.g. avoidance of smooth and creamy

foods or irritation in response to crunchy or lumpy foods); avoidance of touching substances such as finger paint or mud, or of getting one's hands messy; avoidance of walking barefoot on particular surfaces such as sand or grass; a greater than normal resistance to having teeth brushed, hair combed or face washed; and/or a tendency to prefer to touch rather than be touched, especially when the touch is unexpected. Because we do not usually think much about our sense of touch or realize that some people are more "sensitive" than others, many of these behaviors are often attributed to personality, emotional make-up, or behavioral tendencies. However, enough cases of tactile defensiveness have been documented for us to be confident that this is truly a neurologically-based condition which can create a great deal of discomfort and even turmoil for the individuals who experience it and their families. Our sense of touch is closely tied to our emotions. Perceiving frequent discomfort through this sensory system is likely to make an individual demonstrate emotionally potent reactions. Thus, children who experience this condition are often described as irritable, withdrawn, weepy, angry, etc. It's difficult to pay attention if a person is thinking about how his clothes feel, or how much it bothered him when someone brushed against his skin while he was standing in line. Individuals who have this condition can cope with it better at some times than they are able at other times. Stresses such as fatigue, illness, anxiety and even hunger often make the defensive reactions more severe. Therapy aimed at reducing tactile defensiveness attempts to gradually elicit more regulated reactions to various tactile sensations. The goal is to normalize the way the nervous system registers and interprets touch information and to develop productive coping strategies for understanding and living with increased sensitivity.

What You Can Do To Help

The following are ways you may be able to help your child or other members of your family who seem to display tactile defensiveness:

- Light, ticklish touch is usually the most irritating. When you touch your child, attempt to use firm and constant pressure, versus light touch. You may be able to help your child avoid the irritation of light touch by asking the teacher if your child can stand at the front or back of lines or at the end of a reading circle at school rather than in the middle.
- Firm, consistent-pressure tends to override tactile irritation. This is why we naturally rub something that hurts and it is probably how hugging developed.
- Firm massage, pressure (as in wrapping: the arms or legs with a stretchy material such as an ace bandage) and gently "sandwiching" the child between cushions may be helpful.
- Pay attention to which types of clothing, play substances or social situations ((e.g. walking through a crowded mall) seem to elicit negative reactions from your child. Until the problem is alleviated, try to avoid irritating situations (e.g. let your child wear all cotton clothes if they is what she prefers).
- Avoid power struggles over this unless safety or some other critical issue is involved. It is easy to thin that the child with tactile defensiveness is trying to manipulate you or purposefully make your life difficult. Believe him when he tries to tell you something hurts. There is a good chance that it does.

Note: any sudden or significant change in behavior should always be checked. Children with issues around sleep, digestion, allergies and other medically based conditions might show increased irritability, including tactile sensitivity. Be sure that other possible conditions are considered and fully evaluated before assuming that these behaviors are sensory in nature.

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