

Understanding The Senses

Tactile System: Touch



The tactile system is our sense of touch, with receptors throughout the body helping us understand and interact with the world around us. It supports body awareness and helps keep us safe by detecting sensations such as pain, temperature, itch, and potential danger.

OVERVIEW

The Tactile System

The tactile system is our sense of touch. Receptors cover every part of our body.

Touch sensation is processed through two different pathways

Discriminative touch tells us about the tactile qualities of the objects in our world. The intensity, location, duration and texture, allowing us to identify and manipulate objects with skill and precision

Rough

Smooth

Furry

Coarse

Bumpy

Soft

Squishy

Slimy etc.



Touch sensation helps to form our body awareness

Touch sensations also protect us, detecting potential threat or danger through pain, temperature, light touch as well as itch and tickle.

It's why we act to protect ourselves, pulling away from something too hot, notice when something hurts or itches.

WHAT YOU MIGHT NOTICE

Common Signs of Differences with Tactile Processing

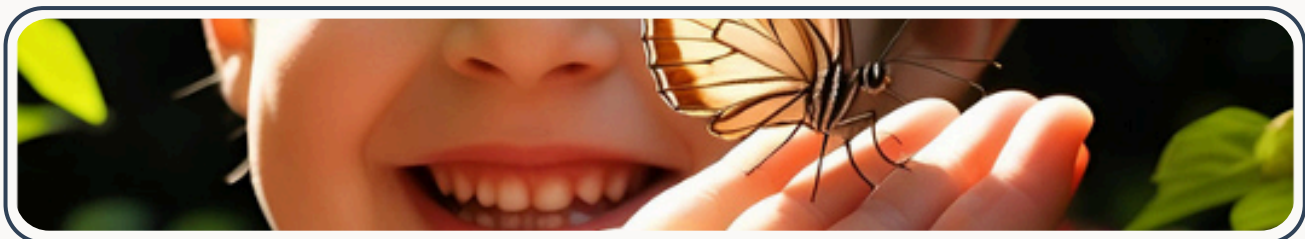
Tends to increase touch input, looking to:

- Touch everything, furniture, everyday items on table / desk – pencils, erasers, elastic bands etc
- Fidget with hair, fabric, skin
- Puts objects in mouth.

When discriminative touch is less efficient, a child may have difficulty identifying precise qualities of what they are feeling. Common signs of differences with tactile discrimination:

- Difficulty with precise tasks, as doing up buttons / zipper, holding pencil, handwriting
- Difficulty finding objects by touch alone, often needing to look rather than feel alone
- Hands or fingers seem imprecise, almost as if they are wearing gloves
- Tends to look intently at hands when picking up, manipulating small objects

If you think your child may have differences with vestibular processing contact your local Occupational Therapist to discuss the process of assessment and intervention.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Tactile Defensiveness

Tactile Defensiveness is a term that describes when everyday touch sensations are experienced as unpleasant and may be responded to as if they are threatening or painful. Some nervous systems find common tactile experiences unpleasant, which may be classed as tactile defensiveness. If we feel safe, everyday sensory experiences are generally experienced as enjoyable. However almost everyone experiences touch sensation as unpleasant when they feel unsafe. Speak with an Occupational Therapist if you would like to learn more.

Potential signs of tactile defensiveness

Dislikes or uncomfortable with some touch, tending to:

- Avoids messy play on hands, ground cover such as sand, grass
- Dislikes grooming, having hair cut, face washed, teeth cleaned, nails clipped
- Avoids sunscreen and other lotions on body
- Irritated by / dislikes some fabric, socks, shoes, jumpers, jeans, tags, hat
- Particular about clothing, may prefer minimal clothing or alternatively clothing that covers whole body to avoid skin being touched by anything else



PRACTICAL TIPS

Ways to Support the Tactile System

Ways to support protective touch system and tactile defensiveness:

- Provide opportunities for deep pressure touch and proprioception input to reduce sensitive touch receptors:
- Bean bags, snug corner: squished behind lounge, under bed etc
- Heavy / weighted toys or blankets
- Heavy work activities, carrying, pushing, pulling
- Gradually introduce new textures
- Offer lots of heavy, whole-body movement

Ways to support precise discriminative touch:

- Sensory rich tubs: containers filled with rice, water, water beads, sand
- Opportunities to touch rich variety of textures, shaving cream, slime, finger paint, play doh, plasticine, clay
- Games that encourage precision: threading, beading, small peg board

