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Difficulty with physical contact

Why does this happen?

- A child with autism may have a heightened sense of touch. He may overreact to physical contact or have an intense dislike of particular kinds of contact, ie. he may not tolerate someone lightly brushing up against him. Adults with autism have described how a light touch or brush from another person can cause discomfort or pain.
- A child with autism might prefer physical contact and affection to be on his terms. He may find it difficult to cope when another person initiates the contact.
- If a child has a negative reaction to physical contact, remember that he may actually like the person who initiated the contact; it's just the contact that he dislikes.
- The child may have difficulty understanding what is communicated by physical contact. It might be difficult for him to interpret the meaning of gesture and body language.
- The child may have strong reactions to the perfume or deodorant of other people, leading to avoidance of physical contact.

What you can do

- Allow the child to sit at the edge of the mat at group time, or to eat his lunch at the end of table where there is little through traffic. Some children need this personal space in order to reduce anxiety and cope with group situations.
- The child might enjoy firm, constant pressure, such as the sensation of being sandwiched between two bean bags. This could be incorporated into a 'comfort zone' for the child to retreat to when he is feeling overloaded by the presence of others. See [Creating a safe place](#) for more information.
- If the child's parents agree, talk to other students about the difficulties experienced by the child with autism. Ask them to be tolerant of his difficulties.
- Role play situations to help the child develop more appropriate responses to physical contact.
- Consider that perfume or aftershave worn by teaching staff, parent helpers or aides may be very off-putting. The child may refuse to interact and may not verbalise his strong dislike of the offending 'smell'.
- Games and songs that encourage physical contact with others can help to increase the child's tolerance to being touched.