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Difficulty with physical contact

Riley hits out at his peers as they walk past him. He is tactile defensive and wants others to get out of his space.

Why does this happen?

- The child 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.
- The child might prefer physical contact and affection only on his own terms. He may find it difficult to cope when another person initiates the contact.
- If the student 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. A child with autism may be unable to tolerate another child accidentally bumping into him. He might react with anger because of his difficulty interpreting the actions of others.
- The child might have trouble understanding what is communicated by physical contact. This is due to his poor ability to interpret the meaning of gesture and body language.
- Some children with autism have strong reactions to the perfume or deodorant of other people, leading to avoidance of physical contact. In some cases, this has led to a student walking out of class.

What you can do

- There is a huge pay-off for teachers who are prepared to familiarise themselves with and understand the student's particular sensory issues. Remember each child has his/her own set of behaviours. Do not overgeneralise – autism is not like other disabilities.
- Allow the student to sit at a table where there is little or no through traffic. Some children need this personal space in order to reduce anxiety and cope with group situations.
- The child may enjoy firm, constant pressure, such as the sensation of being sandwiched between two bean bags or snuggled underneath one. This could be incorporated into a timeout space for the student to retreat to when he is feeling overloaded by the presence of others. See also [Creating a home base](#).
- 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 and to respect his personal space.
- The student may resist lining up with his peers because he dislikes the tactile stimulation. Get him to stand at the back or front of the line. Another strategy would be to reduce the time you require the student to stand in line and slowly increase it.
- Role play situations can 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 overwhelming to the student. This may prevent him from interacting in class and he may not verbalise his strong dislike of the offending 'smell'.
- Games and songs that encourage physical contact with others can help to increase the student's tolerance to being touched.