Back to School
Being Proactive: When Things Get “Touchy”

Compiled by Kristi Jordan, OTR/L

Your evidence-based visual supports are hopefully in place now that your students have arrived! Using visual organization in your schools and classrooms benefits most, if not all students. More on visual supports.

This week’s sensory strategy is When Things get “Touchy”: Touch/Tactile Sensory Processing

Touch is a basic sense that develops early, in the womb. Touch organizes and provides information to our other senses. It can be alerting or calming, depending on the type of touch, context, and how we respond to it. Our successful integration of touch processing helps us to experience touch and to respond in a safe way. Some students over-respond to touch. They often avoid touch at all costs or become overstimulated by touch. This may mean that they become agitated by unintentional touches and get in trouble (i.e. when standing in line or during group activities). This may mean that they are distracted or distressed by their clothing or routines involving tactile stimulation in the classroom, such as washing their hands, art class, or snack/lunch. Other students under-respond to touch. They crave touch experiences and may touch everything and everyone throughout the day, just to gain more sensory information. There are also individuals who are tactile learners. They learn more through physically touching objects and materials. Considering these extremes and those who fall somewhere in between, you can create opportunities for touch seekers, touch avoiders, and tactile learners in your classroom.
Here are a few of those opportunities, but remember to work with your building OT on developing sensory strategies within classrooms in your buildings.

**Sensory Table**

For smaller students, a sensory table is a mainstay in their classrooms. These sensory experiences can be useful for older students too. Consider how you can incorporate sensory tubs or tables into learning centers for math, reading, or other academic activities. You can also use tactile experiences to make writing more fun for touch seekers and tactile learners, like whipped cream, sugar, or even sandpaper under paper. For touch avoiders, you may wish to provide them with tongs or tools to have more control over how much they touch items during these and related fine motor activities, such as gluing or snack. For writing, they may also need additional ways to reduce the tactile sensory information, such as smoother writing utensils or surfaces, such as using softer lead or markers instead of pencils or gel pens instead of ball point pens.

**Sensory box**

Use a small box or container to keep fidgets and tactile objects inside for students to use as needed to focus their hands, minds and bodies during instruction. This box is a “Calming Cubby” that was shared on Pinterest.com. For students who may throw items, you may wish to secure items to a surface. Include a variety of textures and incorporate fine motor strengthening with putties or doughs.
Sensory wall

To encourage sensory exploration of different textures, display a bulletin board or wall hanging and vary textures for students to feel and touch. Students may also be involved in creating these. Put them in a strategic place in your classroom so that they are used when and where appropriate for the learning environment. This board was also shared on Pinterest.

Personal Space

To avoid overstimulation for touch seekers and avoiders, set up personal space boundaries in the classroom. Carpet circles for floor activities are an example of how to do this. Creating specific areas and strategically placing students relative to their touch needs is helpful.

Clothing

When individuals are uncomfortable, it is not easy to learn or to interact socially. Touch sensitivities related to clothing, such as itchy shirts, bothersome tags, seams, or elastic waistbands can distract and irritate a sensitive person. There are seamless and tagless versions of clothing available through most major retailers. Specialized clothing companies, such as Soft™ clothing are also available online. Some individuals may also prefer seamless compression shirts to provide input that is calming. Wearing broken-in clothing is another budget friendly option because clothing is usually softer once it has been washed and worn a few times. For students who under-respond, it may be helpful to practice visually checking their clothing to make sure it is on correctly and neatly in place.