Body Language - Learning Through Your Skin.

By

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Touch is our first language. From the time we are born our sense of touch is fully developed.

For some children, however, their sense of touch does not develop properly. Children can be ‘hypersensitive' and become tactile defensive, they can be under-responsive to touch (hyposensitive), or have poor tactile discrimination and not be able to properly recognise and discriminate between objects and shapes. The consequences of a tactile disorder can be serious enough to affect a child's learning capabilities. The story of young Adam's struggle at school serves to explain the problems that can occur.

Adam was 6 years old but was not yet adjusting well to school. His teacher reported that he didn't like playing with the other children. He would sit by himself or play alone rather than join in with their games. The teacher suggested that Adam didn't like being touched by the other children or the teacher. He would overreact to others approaching him often trying to avoid them altogether. In class, he seemed to have an aversion to doing art, especially when it was messy or involved things like finger painting or using paste. But his general work was also below average. He was not progressing with his drawing capabilities, his colouring or his letter writing.

Adam's parents were at a loss as to what to do. His dad thought Adam would grow out of it but mother felt there was something basically wrong: Adam should be enjoying school and want to play with the other children, she thought.

It took a visit to an Occupational Therapist and an assessment of Adam's sensory system to get an answer to Adam's problem. Adam was exhibiting a tactile processing disorder called tactile defensiveness. His skin was sensing information but his tactile sensory system was not processing the information correctly and he was, accordingly, hypersensitive to touch.

The occupational therapist explained that because Adam was hypersensitive to touch, and thus, tactile defensive, he avoided touching and discerning the shape and feel of many objects. Therefore his tactile discrimination had become limited. His brain was not building up a memory of his physical world and this was having a detrimental affect upon

his fine motor and gross motor coordination. It also meant that his motor planning skills (how he organises and carries out tasks) were under developed because he did not have sufficient information in his head to plan and carry out an activity.

Children, like Adam, who have a tactile processing disorder need attention to have the disorder corrected. Where it is left unattended, as time goes on, a child's ability to do well at school will diminish if he does not get some sensory integration therapy. High-level functions, such as writing, drawing, language, and reasoning, are dependent upon the development first of low-level functions and the integration of sensory systems of our bodies. Primary to this development is the tactile system.

The tactile system functions before a baby is even born. As an embryo develops, its outer membrane surrounding the brain and the spinal cord, becomes our skin. As the largest organ of the body, our skin continues, after birth, to sense the world around us and act as the outer-membrane of the brain.

As our first language, touch is so important to our development. We learn through what we touch. A baby wanting to reach out and put things in their mouth is their first and primary way of learning. The mouth and then the fingers act as sensors for the brain to build up a bank of information which is categorised for discrimination and activity. Thus, an infant requires a range of physical experiences of movement, shape and form in order to develop knowledge of their world and the skill to use their bodies in the world around them.

Our skin senses pressure, temperature, texture, pain, vibration, movement, shape as well as differentiating between soft and deep touch. Over time, we learn by perceiving information and interpreting it to build up habits of response in our activities. Where there is poor and inadequate information, the sensory process malfunctions, and our learning is impaired, and so are our capabilities. Thus, there is a direct link between our perception and the development of intelligence.

We learn to hold and control a pencil because we can feel the pencil, and through it, the paper, and can plan out what we are doing by mapping and coordinating our activities in writing and drawing.

Tactile Defensiveness means that the child is not learning as they should through perceiving the world and others around them. Movement and touch are a child's first teachers. At school where his fundamental tactile development is assumed, he will be at a disadvantage.

- First, a child with a tactile dysfunction lacks good body awareness. He is uncomfortable using his body in his environment because it means touching.

- Second, a child with poor perception of his body is likely to experience delays in gross motor skill development and, accordingly be somewhat uncoordinated in the use of his large muscles as well as his use of hands or feet to manipulate objects.

- Third, the tactile defensive child is likely to have fine motor skill problems. This not only affects the use of fingers and hands for writing and drawing, but will affect their mouth and tongue and may very well hinder the development of speech as well. They may also have oral motor development problems affecting speech and eating abilities.

- Fourth, a tactile defensive child will have trouble with their motor planning. As a child integrates tactile sensations, such climbing, running or drawing, he must plan his movements to get the desired effect. The more a child touches and explores, the more he learns. The less he does, the less he can do.

- Fifth, the child is likely to experience auditory processing problems, having trouble following instructions, reading and the use of language.

To correct these problems requires a programme of sensory development and sensory integration. The skin has to be stimulated to develop sensory awareness and discrimination and to transmit messages to the brain that build the intelligence for motor

planning skills. Whether it is young Stuart learning to turn the pages of his Noddy book, or Adam learning to draw a picture of Dad for his father's Day card, the development of the sense of touch is important to growth and happiness.

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