

Body Space Awareness

Is your child standing too close?



Is your child:

- Hearing people say, “Don’t stand so close to me?”
- Having challenges reading social cues?
- Getting too rough with peers and ignoring their discomfort?
- Described as a ‘close talker?’
- Hugging others too much?
- Seeming oblivious to peers’ reactions to what he says or does?
- Being called loud and obnoxious?
- Bumping into everything or everyone?
- Sitting slumped over and appearing lethargic?
- Pressing too light or hard on the paper when writing?
- Appearing clumsy and awkward?

LET’S TALK ABOUT IT

Children who have challenges with body space awareness often struggle to judge appropriate social space. They may bump into people. Sometimes they might overdo it when offering a hug or a high-five. They might hug too hard or linger too long. Children with these challenges may run into a play situation or a group of children gathered together, without checking to see if their presence is welcome. A child with this difficulty

might talk too loud or too close to a person's face. He may play too rough, not realizing that other children are uncomfortable or upset.

Alternately, some with these issues relate to having trouble knowing where their own bodies are in space. Body space awareness has an impact on coordination, ability to know how hard or soft to push on something (grading pressure), and the speed of movement. These kids may seem like a 'bull in a china shop,' often breaking toys or school supplies accidentally.

Children who struggle with knowing where their bodies are might bump into walls, run into windows, and may appear very clumsy. Some kids with these challenges are described as floppy. It appears as if they are not comfortable in their own skin. Kids with proprioception problems are often awkward physically and may have challenges with some sports or athletics.

CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

These problems clinically could fall into the following three main areas: *attention*, *social communication*, and *proprioception*.

Attention (Focusing): With regard to *attention*, sometimes children or adults miss social cues because they cannot shift well from one setting to another or from one social expectation to another. For example, the teacher may have called 'time for quiet reading,' and your child is still running around as he was allowed to do in the preceding activity.

Sustained Attention: Sometimes *sustained attention* could be the problem. This term refers to the ability to maintain attention to a task for longer periods. For example, your child may have trouble with personal space because he does not consistently listen to and follow the rules of a game.

Social communication refers to the ability to communicate socially because a large part of social communication involves reading nonverbal cues like personal space, facial expression and body language. Social reciprocity is the ability to engage fluidly in back and forth interaction in a reciprocal manner. Again, having the ability to read nonverbal cues helps with body space awareness.

Proprioception: A final reason your child may struggle with body space awareness is called proprioception. Proprioception is the awareness of where your body is in space, as informed by the muscles and joints [1]. It affects a child's ability to determine the amount of pressure he or she exerts. Children may stand too close to a peer in front of them because they are not sensing where their body is in relation to others. They may give a hug that is too tight due to poor understanding of body space and physical pressure.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD IS UNAWARE OF PERSONAL SPACE

If your child struggles with personal space awareness, it is likely that something is going on that requires some attention or support.

Disabilities: Often, children with ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have difficulties with personal space.

Sensory problems: Some children with sensory sensitivities, which are associated with ADHD or ASD, may have a tendency to bump into people or to jump around impulsively, appearing as if driven by a motor.

Social skills problems: The skills of reading nonverbal cues and developing appropriate body space can and should be taught to kids if the skills are not developing naturally.

Therapy: An evaluation may be necessary if the problems are significant. Therapy, such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Occupational Therapy, and Psychotherapy may be indicated in order to help your child learn how to maintain appropriate personal space and to gain an understanding of non-verbal social cues.

Suggestions to help increase your child's body space awareness

- Use a hula hoop as a visual for the size of a personal bubble
- Read 'Personal Space Camp' [3]
- Watch videos/look at pictures, and have the child identify the emotions in the story characters
- Practice observing social cues, such as look at eyebrows, mouth, eyes, hands, body posture, tone and volume of voice
- Encourage the child to look for clues in peers that the peer is uncomfortable, such as taking a step back or showing an annoyed facial expression
- Create a target and label different people in a child's life and how each 'level' of relationship is different. Start with the circle in the center, with family (center), friends (second), acquaintances (third), and strangers (final) and discuss the different ways to interact with them, including how much personal space is appropriate for each
- Have the child climb through hula hoops in different directions without touching them
- Do yoga to help build body space awareness
- Give a child a sticker and have them place it on a part of their body without looking (i.e. nose, forehead, knee)
- Practice heavy work activities, such as wheelbarrow walks, wall push-ups, and jumping (these activities give input to the body to help feel where they are in space)

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- [Motor Coordination \(Moving & Sensing\)](#): running, walking; catching or kicking a ball, clumsiness
- [Depth Perception](#): judging how far away something is
- [Learning problems \(Learning\)](#): could be related to challenges with reading or writing
- Vision challenges: some difficulties with visual spatial may be due to eye problems.

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

*Children who have significant problems in this area may have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does not serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Developmental Coordination Disorder](#): body space awareness problems can be related to challenges with fine motor, likely including poor handwriting
- [Autism](#): poor body space understanding in terms of social awareness is often associated with autism. Autism should be considered when [Central Coherence](#) or [Shifting attention](#) is an issue
- [ADHD](#): body space awareness problems can be due to challenges with sustained attention, hyperactivity or impulsivity

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a customized profile of concerns for your child or to consult live with a psychologist
- [Physical Therapist](#): to assess and treat gross motor coordination; to help with large muscle groups and movement
- [Occupational Therapist](#): to assess and treat fine motor skills and sensory integration needs

- [Psychologist](#): to consider symptoms in context; poor body space awareness may be related to visual spatial problems, attention, or sensory, social, or motor problems.

These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:

- [MVPT-4](#): assesses areas of visual perception, which can be related to body space awareness problems
- [Beery VMI sequence](#): assess visual-motor integration, visual perception and motor coordination, which can be related to body space awareness problems
- [WISC-V](#): assesses general intelligence and visual tracking and visual motor through tasks of block design, coding, symbol search and cancellation
- [DAS-2](#): assesses general cognitive ability including a measure of spatial skills, which can be related to body space awareness. Test includes a spatial index score consisting of block design and a copying or recalling designs subtest

LEARN MORE

[1] Whitney, R. (2016). *Definition of sensory terms*.

Retrieved from http://www.spdbayarea.org/definition_of_sensory_terms.htm

[2] Growing hands on kids (2017).

Retrieved from: <http://www.growinghandsonkids.com/10-body-awareness-activities-kids.html>

[3] Cook, Julia (2012). *Personal space camp*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Personal-Space-Camp-Julia-Cook/dp/1931636877/>

[4] Kroncke, Anna P., & Willard, Marcy & Huckabee, Helena (2016). *Assessment of autism spectrum disorder: Critical issues in clinical forensic and school settings*. Springer, San Francisco.

Springer: <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319255026>

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Psychological/dp/3319255029/>

[5] Baker, Jed. (2001). *The social skills picture book: Teaching play, emotion, and communication to children with autism*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Picture-Teaching-emotion-communication-children/dp/1885477910/>

[6] Gray, Carol & Attwood, Tony (2010). *The New Social Story Book, Revised and Expanded 10th Anniversary Edition: Over 150 Social Stories that Teach Everyday Social Skills to Children with Autism or Asperger's Syndrome, and their Peers.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Social-Story-Revised-Expanded-Anniversary/dp/1935274058/>

[7] Giler, Janet Z. (2000). *Socially ADDept: A manual for parents of children with ADHD and / or learning disabilities.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Socially-ADDept-Children-Learning-Disabilities/dp/0966696921/>

[8] Smith, Bryan & Griffen, Lisa M. (2016). *What were you thinking? Learning to control your impulses (Executive function).*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/What-Were-You-Thinking-Learning/dp/1934490962/>

Image credit:

Description: Group of children (8-11) standing by blue wall, side view

Image ID: 200461428 (iStock)

By: Nick White

Licensed: May 13, 2017

Teaching-Children-personal-space-boundaries

Stylized by Katie Harwood exclusively for CLEAR Child Psychology



www.cleape.com