



Simple Activities to Help Provide Physical Touch

When Kids are Overwhelmed by Sensory Stimulation

By **Springbrook Autism Behavioral Health Team**

Physical touch is a basic human need for everyone, including children with autism—even children who have sensory processing disorders and may be defensive against touch. Touch is a natural instinct that provides emotional security. It's also the easiest of the [five love languages](#)¹ to use unconditionally, which means using physical touch strongly telegraphs: "I love you!" On the other hand, failing to touch your child shouts just as strongly: "I don't love you!" Clearly, this can put parents into a no-win situation if their child avoids touch altogether or is reluctant to allow it. Even with a touch-defensive child, there are ways to communicate love through physical touch.

How to tell if physical touch is your child's love language

Is it even possible for a child who is touch-resistant to have physical touch as a primary love language? Absolutely! Being

resistant to touch is typically a purely physical response due to a sensory integration or sensory modulation issue. Physical touch as a love language, however, fills an emotional role for your child, separate from the physical response. Certain kinds of touch may actually be distracting, upsetting, or even painful to your child, but that doesn't mean your child doesn't need touch.

Here are a few clues that suggest physical touch may be your child's love language:

- **Your child asks for or seeks out hugs or likes to cuddle**
Often, children who shy away or push you away when you try to hug them will find ways to hug you instead. When you are hugging your spouse, does your child try to get in the middle of the hug? Does your child like to cuddle with a blanket or a favorite stuffed animal? These are signs your child expresses love through touch.

- **Your child likes physical games, roughhousing, or contact sports**

With autism, it's all about the kind of touch the child is seeking. Some children who don't like hugs or cuddling love roughhousing. Children who love contact sports or who like to play rough, wrestle, or crash into things are often looking for a less emotional way to add more touch into their daily routines.

- **Your child likes holding your hand**

This is a very simple way to express love or the need for additional security and doesn't require as much contact as an embrace.

- **Your child likes backrubs, back scratches, or hair brushing**

A lot of kids hate being touched on the back or having their hair brushed. Children who seek out this kind of interaction are very likely to have physical touch as their primary love language.

Activities that provide physical touch without overwhelming your child

Almost all children with autism have some resistance to touch or are, at the very least, easily overwhelmed by sensory stimulation. In addition to using sensory integration therapy and other occupational therapies to help your child build up a tolerance for being touched, there are ways you can include touch in your child's daily routine without causing a meltdown or flooding the senses. We tend to think of physical touch as highly emotionally-charged, full-body embraces, but that doesn't have to be the case. As with all new experiences you are adding to your child's routine, start small, experiment to find out what works best for your child, and have patience.

Here are a few creative ideas to help you add touch to your child's daily routine:

- **Sit close together.** The warmth of your presence nearby is often enough to give easily stimulated children the physical touch they crave.
- **Pat back/shoulders.** A gentle squeeze or massage is affectionate without being overwhelming to your child.
- **Play Twister.** Make physical interaction fun! There are all kinds of games that provide much needed physical touch without requiring too much of an emotional investment from your child.

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- **Sing songs with interactive hand motions or dance.** It may sound strange, but you don't always have to actually be touching for an activity to count as physical touch. Moving in unison, such as doing silly dances or walks together or singing songs with group hand motions, stimulates the same feel-good endorphins as physical touch.
- **Help the child with hand over hand assistance.** Does your child need help buttoning a coat, putting on shoes, or buckling up in the car? These are wonderful, practical ways to include physical touch in your day.
- **Side hugs.** These are great for kids who need physical touch but don't like eye contact or other face-to-face interactions.
- **High-fives.** Sometimes a simple high-five, fist-bump, or secret handshake is enough to let children know they are loved. Plus, these actions are fun, inclusive, and low stakes. I also recommend “air high-fives” or “air clapping” for children who are particularly sensitive to touch.
- **Apply lotion.** Any kind of grooming can be an ideal opportunity for physical touch. Lotion or sunscreen is especially good for children who react negatively to rough textures or skin-on-skin contact.

¹*The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts* by Gary Chapman is an internationally best-selling book that topped the New York Times list for 10 years running and is now celebrating nearly 30 years in print. Many of the ideas in this article are not original, rather, they are summarized, adding a unique take based on professional experiences, and explaining ways parents can adapt Chapman's ideas to better suit special needs children.

Springbrook Autism Behavioral Health is a state-of-the-art campus and nationally renowned program for the treatment of autism in children and adolescents ages 5-21. Springbrook works with the entire spectrum of children, adolescents, teens, and adults with autism, including patients at all developmental levels. The experts at Springbrook begin work with children at younger ages, using advanced, evidence-based autism therapy programs. Their dedicated staff is committed to autism programs and therapies that address the needs of the whole child beyond the diagnosis. Springbrook has been serving children with autism and their families at their campus in Traveler's Rest, SC, for over 30 years.

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