

## TIP SHEET

# Personal Space



There are some social rules that we take for granted until they are broken. The rule about personal space is definitely one of these rules.

There are unwritten or unspoken rules about how close you can come to people in different situations without making them feel uncomfortable. For example, most children learn (without actually being taught) that they should not stand or sit too close to other children. They know that there is an appropriate distance to keep from other people.

Most children know that there are some situations (such as when you are in a crowded room or an elevator) in which you can stand or sit close to others and other times when you should keep a suitable distance away (standing in line or at circle time).

Most children also know that you can be closer to some people (family and friends) than to others.

However, for some children, the rule about personal space is unclear. These children might be accused of crowding others because they stand or sit

too close. On the other hand, some children might want more personal space than we typically expect and get upset when they feel that others are invading their space.

The concept of personal space is one that can be taught to most children. Here are some strategies that might be helpful in teaching this social skill.

## **Helping Children Respect Others' Personal Space**

### **1) Direct Class-Wide Teaching**

#### **What is Direct Class-Wide Teaching?**

There are some skills that, while particularly challenging for certain students, can be taught to the whole class or to small groups of children.

Using this strategy, you directly teach the whole class specific social skills (what to say and do in a specific social situation) and then give them opportunities to practice the skills in a natural environment.

## Personal Space, continued

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By using class-wide teaching, all children can benefit from learning, practicing and being reinforced for a specific skill.

When you are teaching a group of children a specific social skill, remember that, as with any skill, it might be easy for some children and more challenging for others.



**Direct Class-Wide Teaching of social skills is most successful when you are:**

- **PATIENT** - some children might need more reminders, more support, and more time to learn and use the skill;
- **CONSISTENT** – make sure that you and any other adults in the child’s life have the same expectations of the child;
- **POSITIVE** – remember to spot children using the skill and reinforce them as much and as specifically as possible.

Here is an example of how to use Direct Class-Wide Teaching to teach children how to get someone’s attention:

### **Facilitate**

Facilitate a discussion that gets the children thinking about the skill.

“How close to other people should you stand or sit? Show me.”

“How does it feel when someone stands too close to you?”

“Are there times when it is OK to stand very close to other people?”

### **Teach**

Teach the children a rule that will help them understand and use the skill. A social script can be helpful at this stage.

“Most of the time, you should stand one arm’s length from other people. Like this. Now you try.”

### **Role play**

Give the children an opportunity to practice the skill by doing a role play or puppet show.

At first, two adults can do the role play and then encourage the children to try. Demonstrate a correct and incorrect example of respecting personal space so that the children are very clear about the words and actions that you are expecting.

### **Reinforce**

Tell the children that you will be watching for this skill for a week. Reinforce children who display the skill and remember to label the behaviour that you want to see.

“That’s great, Sophia!. You are standing one arm’s length from Mohammed.”

### **Review**

Talk about the skill for a few minutes each day so that it is fresh in the children’s minds and reinforces the importance of social skills.

At the end of the week, facilitate a discussion so that the children can talk about how it felt using the skill throughout the week.

“Who remembered to respect everyone’s personal space this week?”

“How did it feel when other kids were not too close or too far from you?”

### 2) Social Scripts

#### What is a Social Script?

A Social Script is a method of teaching children how to behave in specific social situations. It might include a short description of a challenging social situation and then it provides suggestions of specific things the child can say or do in response to the social situation.

#### How do I use a Social Script?

It is best to work on one script at a time in order to keep things clear for the child.

Review and practice the script at least once a day when it is first introduced. As the child begins to understand and use the new skill, you can practice the script less often and refer back to it to remind the child what to do in specific situations.

It is not a good idea to try using the Social Script while the situation is happening. Instead, review it at the beginning of the day and then, when the situ-

ation actually occurs, you can remind the children of the strategies they have learned.

Children can practice the Social Script by doing role-plays or by using puppets or dolls.

When I am talking to someone, I should not be in their personal space.

I should stay one arm's length from people when I am talking to them.

I should not touch other people's bodies when I am talking to them.

Sometimes it is OK to be closer than one arm's length to a person. These times are when it is crowded or when the other person is a close friend or family member.

Depending on the child's skill level, you can write a Social Script using words only, or you can add pictures or photographs to help depict each step. Here is an example of a Social Script written to help a child learn how to “respect other people's personal space”.

When children are taught the unwritten rule about personal space, they will become more aware of how their behaviour (such as crowding or touching) affects others. When you clearly teach them how to respect other people's

personal space, you create a more pleasant environment where everyone can work, play, and learn comfortably.

### For more information:

- Take a look at some of the other social skills in this section such as: [Getting Someone's Attention](#), [Listening to Others](#), [Turn Taking](#), [Sharing](#) and [Joining in Play](#).
- Visit our workshop on [Visual Communication](#).
- Explore our section on [CREATING COMFORTABLE SPACES](#) to learn more about ways to set-up your classroom and promote positive behaviour.