

Personal Space – A Social Skill

by Julie A. Daymut, M.A., CCC-SLP

What Is Personal Space?

Personal space is the area of space that closely surrounds our bodies. It is space that we often like to keep to ourselves. Generally, you can measure your personal space by extending your arms out—the space between your fingertips and body is your personal space. When a stranger or someone you do not know well is in your personal space, you might feel uncomfortable, closed in, or violated. When a family member or close friend hugs you or comes in close to talk to you, you might feel safe.



Being respectful of someone's personal space is a social skill. Individuals who have difficulty showing appropriate social skills may unknowingly invade your personal space. Conversely, individuals with social-skill difficulties or sensory issues may be extremely opposed to you being in their personal space. As well, it is important to keep in mind that different cultures have different ideas about personal space.

What Are Some Examples of Personal Space in the School Setting?

You might notice that your child or a student in your class has difficulty with following the rules of personal space. This can be a significant problem in the school setting where others surround a child all day. Some examples of personal space in the school setting include:

- **Desk area** – A child may not like other students to be close to his/her desk.
- **Cafeteria** – A child may stand in line or eat too close to others.
- **Playground** – A child may stand too far from others and not be able to easily participate in a game.
- **Library** – A child may want to sit away from others during story time.
- **Computer station** – A child may reach over the other student when working at the computer.

What Are Some Strategies to Help a Child Follow the Rules of Personal Space?

There are several strategies to help a child learn the rules of personal space. Here are some examples.

- **Model good body language** – Stand at an appropriate distance from the child and let the child see you stand at an appropriate distance from others.

- **Teach social cues for body language** – Explain and demonstrate facial expressions, eye contact, or body movements someone might make if he/she is uncomfortable with you being in his/her personal space. These can include turning your head, backing away, crossing your arms, etc. Have the child identify these cues and practice responding appropriately to them.
- **Look at pictures** – View pictures of appropriate and inappropriate personal space. Compare the pictures with the child and have him/her label the body language (e.g., “He is too close,” “That kid looks uncomfortable”).
- **Practice personal space** – Have the child stand up and hold out his/her arm to “see” personal space.
- **Have a discussion about personal space** – Explain what personal space is, why it’s important, and how a child can respect the personal space of others.
- **Give breaks to a child who needs personal space** – Allow a child who has sensory issues with others in his/her space to have breaks from groups during the day.



Helpful Products

The list of Super Duper® products below may be helpful when working with children who have special needs. Visit www.superduperinc.com and type in the item name or number in our search engine. Click the links below to see the product description.

*What Do You Say... What Do You Do...®
At School?*
[Item #GB-241](#)

Social Inferences Fun Deck®
[Item #FD-92](#)

Focus on Manners! Fun Deck®
[Item #FD-103](#)

Photo Feelings® Combo
[Item #PFC-28](#)

Say and Do® Social Scenes Combo
[Item #BK-368](#)

What Would You Do At School If... Fun Deck®
[Item #FD-131](#)

Social Star Set (Books 1, 2, & 3)
[Item #TPX-5211](#)

Webber® Pragmatics Playing Cards
[Item #CRD-66](#)