

space invaders

As adults we understand how close is too close when it comes to physical proximity, but children, especially those with special educational needs, may need support to grasp the concept, says **Adele Devine...**

You are in a bubble. It contains fresh, unpolluted air and a specially adapted environment. Not everyone can see your bubble. The fine wall is only visible if it catches the light in a certain way. Oh, and the slightest little touch will cause it to pop. You can only guess what the consequences would be...

We all have our bubble. There's an invisible line that we don't like people to pass. If someone gets too close we will naturally take a step back. But it's more complicated than that - our bubbles have layers, like an onion. We expect people to know which layer applies to them, but this can cause confusion. We anticipate that a stranger will know to stand further back than a close friend. Our best friend can walk in and give us a huge hug without bursting our bubble, but if someone we didn't know did this, our reaction would be different. Personal space might be instinctive to the majority of us as adults, but many children (particularly those with Autism Spectrum Conditions) will not have the inbuilt ability to define those space boundaries. So it's up to us to help them learn.

There are many ways to teach children about personal space. We could go out in the playground and draw a chalk 'bubble' around each of them, or give them each a plastic hoop. We could use pictures of different situations with a coloured circle representing personal space. But the earlier we address the issue of personal space the better, because it may not go away. We cannot assume this is simply natural instinct that will kick in over time.



Teach personal space

Try the following strategies to help children learn about personal space:

- Use spots on the floor to teach children how to line up or find a space.
- Use carpet squares so the children have a physical 'personal area' on the floor.
- Use coloured tape or hoops to define personal space visually.
- Refer to visual symbols for good lining

up, walking or sitting.

- Use role play and Social Stories to explain terms like 'find a space.'
- Structure transitions so a child always has something to do.
- Model what to do and use support staff to help.
- Display photographs that model correct spacing.
- Use visual rewards and offer praise when children get it right.
- Wait until every child is in their space before moving on.

CASE STUDY

'Finding a space for Will' (Age 5, Diagnosis: Autism)

Once a day I would ask my class to all "find a space". This was working fine, but I noticed that Will always chose exactly the same space. I wondered what would happen if another child was in his space. Would Will realise and go somewhere else, or had he learnt to 'go and stand on that scratch mark in the far corner of the room'?

Because I had observed what Will was doing I'd prepared a 'just in case' Social Story about finding a space. I prepped Will's one-to-one learning support assistant so she knew to get the story if it was needed.

A few sessions later, I watched little Rosie unwittingly beat Will to his special corner of the sports hall. We watched Will run to the corner and pretty much stand on Rosie. My lovely LSA was there in a flash, story in hand. She took Will's hand and led him to the bench. Together they sat and read the story. I saw her point to the other children standing waiting. Whilst she was reading I praised individuals for keeping their

personal space and explained to the group. Will got up from the bench and tentatively found a new space. From then on Will read the story before the request and found a different space each time.

CASE STUDY

'A new spot for Bella' (Age 5, Diagnosis: Autism)

Bella loved being first. It was the most important thing. She would rush through activities, wolf down her lunch, slap on her paints. The focus was all about being first. I was concerned that Bella or another child might get hurt in the rush to always be at the front of the line at the door. We needed to create some structure fast...

We began by defining space for lining up by using floor spots. A chart on the wall showed the children what colour spot to stand on. I had laminated the children's photos so we could swap them each day. On the first day I purposefully put Bella first. Of course she thoroughly approved of my new system. I made a great issue of rewarding children further back in the line with praise, tokens and stickers. We waited until all the children were in line, ready to go. This meant our class was not first out to play that day. Bella noticed this, but she was used to us not

being first class out.

Next day I moved the photos so Bella was third in line. She clocked this the moment she walked in through the door. "I'm red today?" she asked, to be sure we had not changed the photos by mistake. "It will change every day, Bella. That is fair," I explained. Bella amazed us all and totally accepted our new system. I didn't even need the Social Story I'd prepared! Sometimes all a child needs is some consistent visual structure.

Final thoughts

Not every child is born with an awareness of personal space. Up until they start nursery it may not have been an issue. Being at home with Mum is different to having to negotiate a group. Mum may have been a personal climbing frame, a swing bar and a seat, and children need to learn that climbing on other adults or even children is not acceptable.

There will be moments when it seems frustrating that one child can't seem to line up, sit still or stay in one place. Children are naturally wriggly and some will only learn about personal space with the right structure and support. If we make learning

about personal space visual and motivating they have a greater chance of success.

PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS

TRICKY TIMES FOR CHILDREN WHO STRUGGLE WITH THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL SPACE INCLUDE...

- Transitions
- Playtime
- Carpet time
- Lining up
- Choice time
- In the car
- On the sofa
- On the trampoline
- During party games
- Waiting in queues

TRY THESE RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THEIR LEARNING...

Recommended story book:

Tobin Learns to Make Friends by Diane Murrell – this is the story of a little train learning how to make new friends.

Recommended CPD resource:

Carol Gray has put together a series of useful videos and sample Social Stories – particularly useful if you're helping a child with ASC decode social situations. Visit thegraycenter.org/social-stories

Visual aids:

You can print free visuals, including 'good sitting', 'good walking' and 'good lining up', from senassist.com/resources.html

**about the author**

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