



CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE CHILD CARE

Tip Sheets

Guidelines for Use of Deep Pressure and Weighted Items in Early Childhood Programs

Deep touch pressure is a form of tactile sensory input which has a relaxing, calming and organizing effect on the nervous system. Deep pressure therapy can be provided through firm holding, hugging, and squeezing. (This is the opposite of light touch pressure such as gentle stroking or tickling).

Deep touch pressure can be beneficial to individuals with high levels of anxiety or with heightened arousal levels. For people who seek out increased body awareness, movement, or touch input, deep pressure can provide them with the input they are seeking in order for their bodies to feel fulfilled enough to engage appropriately in the environment around them.

Effects of Deep Touch Pressure

- Gives the body proprioceptive input, which provides awareness of where the body is in space.
- Acts as a calming agent to increase activity in the parasympathetic division ("Rest and Digest") of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) and decrease activity in the sympathetic division ("Fight, Flight, or Freeze") of the ANS.
- Can increase endorphin levels ("happy hormones") and decrease heart rate and blood pressure (indicators of anxiety and stress). Can cause the release of serotonin and dopamine in the brain ("happy neurotransmitters") which provides our bodies with a feeling of calmness.

Keep in mind that not all individuals will respond to deep pressure activities in the same way. Some

experiences could be calming for some individuals and alerting for others. If an individual has an adverse or alerting reaction to an activity that is intended to be calming, discontinue that activity and try something else!

Using Weighted Items

Weighted items are often a mechanism for administering deep pressure. Many weighted items provide deep pressure input while allowing the individual to continue moving around. Using of weighted items may include:

- Compression clothing
- Weighted blankets, vests or ankle weights
- Pressure vests
- Weighted neck and shoulder wraps
- Lap weights
- Weighted "hug" backpacks
- Pea Pods
- Therapy dogs (specially trained to provide pressure)

Note that these items should not be used without the support of an OT.

Guidelines for Using Weighted Items

The "Rule of Thumb" for weighted blankets is that they should weigh 10% of the individual's bodyweight. For increased deep pressure, you could use an item that is 10% of a child's bodyweight plus one additional pound. For example, a 60-pound child could utilize a 6- or 7-pound weighted blanket. This rule applies to children over the age of 3.

Other Deep Pressure Activities

Besides using weighted items, there are deep pressure activities that can be beneficial for individuals with high arousal level, high levels of anxiety, or increased sensory seeking tendencies. These include:

- Deep pressure massage, also known as deep pressure touch or “hand hugs.” Use the palms of your hands to firmly pressure to the child’s body, working from the hands and feet inward towards the torso.
- Tightly wrap your child in a blanket or gently press pillows or cushions over their body.
- Have the child lie on their stomach and support their bodyweight with their hands or forearms while completing puzzles or reading books to provide deep pressure.
- Bear hugs.
- Joint compressions.

Additional Resources

Sensory Integration Global Network
<https://www.siglobalnetwork.org/>

Cautions for Using Weighted Blankets

It is not advised to use weighted blankets with children under the age of 3 or with anyone who could not remove the blanket if they did not want to use it.

- Weighted blankets should never be used as restraints, and individuals should be free to discontinue their use at any time.
- Weighted blankets should not be used for sleeping unless under the close supervision of an adult while the blanket is in use.
- Be on the lookout for signs of overheating (sweating, fatigue, upset affect) and discontinue weighted blanket use if any of these signs are observed.

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.
Copyright © 2020 Center for Inclusive Child Care

These materials may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. Information in this tip sheet has been modified from multiple sources.

Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.