

Personal space: A social skill children need and adults can teach

Learn how to teach the children in your life about personal space and why it's important.

Most young children want to touch everything and everyone as they learn about the world around them. They lick, poke, slap, and hug things and people with little concern about what those objects are or who they belong to. Very young children are generally used to being physically close to family members. Some things, however, are "off limits" to touch and in reality, there are some people who should be kept at arm's length. How can you teach this concept to children?

Visual clues in regard to personal space work best for very young children. Fences are obvious boundaries and define a specific space. It is often necessary to "fence" in an area to keep a baby or toddler safe while they are learning about where they can go and what is acceptable to touch. Baby gates, fencing a play area or building a furniture boundary using kitchen chairs can all provide a clear definition of a child's play space. At the infant/toddler stage, personal boundaries are all about safety.

As children grow and develop it is important to have family rules that define personal spaces for each family member. Everyone needs a space that is just theirs. Many personal spaces can be defined by teaching children to close the door when they are in the bathroom or bedroom or when they are getting dressed or undressed. Set an example for your child by talking out loud about intentions that involve personal space for yourself or your belongings. "I need to change my shirt and I need some privacy. I think I'd better go to my bedroom," or, "I think I should put this figurine from Grandma in a safe place where the baby can't reach it."

A visual cue about personal space for a preschooler can include having the child spin in a circle with her arms outstretched. Explain that the space within the circle is her own personal space and discuss who she might allow inside of the circle. Jump ropes also work well for this activity as a child can fashion the rope in a small circle to discuss who might be allowed in their smallest personal space circle (mom, dad, grandma, etc.). Expanding the circle he might add other family members and acquaintances who would be allowed in an expanded circle. Help the child with suggestions as he explores who should and shouldn't be in his personal space. Don't forget to include a time in the discussion when you talk about when it *is* okay to be in someone's personal space (examples: when the preschool teacher has children stand in line or a room is really crowded). An even larger rope circle can expand on the discussion of personal space with a preschooler when talking about "strangers". Hula hoops are another good tool to use to explain personal space to children.

In the children's book, "Personal Space Camp" by Julia Cook, hula hoops are used to teach a young boy, Louis, about "comfort bubbles" when he accepts an invitation to

personal space camp from the school principal. A fun family outdoor game of "space tag" requires all participants to run while holding a hula hoop as they chase each other. Instead of touching another player, you just bump their hoop with yours. Another children's book, "Hands Off Harry" by Rosemary Wells, is a story about a kindergartener who keeps doing things that get him into trouble. The message in this book can teach a child that learning about personal space is sometimes a lot of work.

Three rules apply when trying to teach any new social skill to young children:

- **Patience, patience, patience.** Preschool children have a short attention span and may need to be reminded many times about the same thing.
- **Be consistent.** If it is not okay to barge into the bathroom without knocking, the rule should apply to everyone in the family. If a rule changes, let the child know. A toddler may not be allowed to handle knives, but a preschooler who is responsible may be allowed to set the table and handle the silverware. Family rules can be flexible to allow for normal development. When caregivers are inconsistent children get confused.
- **Be positive.** Catch a child respecting someone's personal space and comment on it. "I see you asked permission of your brother before you entered his room. You are really learning about respecting personal space."

It is impossible to be with preschool children in every social situation to help them learn about personal space. In "Beyond Behavior Management: the Six Life Skills Children Need," author Jenna Bilmes shares examples of sentences that can be used to teach children to advocate for their own personal space when there is not an adult in close proximity: "Don't take that; I'm using it right now," or "Move over; you're sitting too close to me." Practicing social scripts with children will prepare them in advance for a situation that might be too close for comfort.

Every adult can teach children about boundaries and personal space by modeling the behavior they'd like to see, discussion and interactive play. Children need to learn about personal space as they grow and develop. It is another important social skill for academic success. For more articles on child development, academic success and parenting, please visit the Michigan State University Extension website.

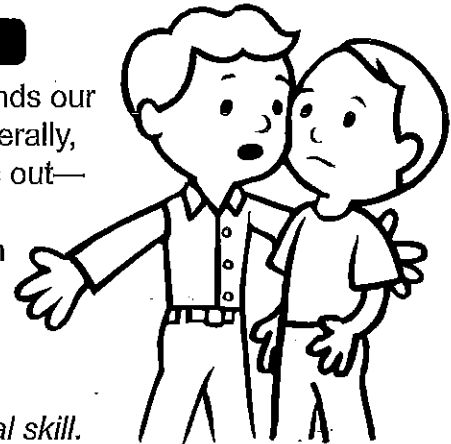
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Personal Space – A Social Skill

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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:

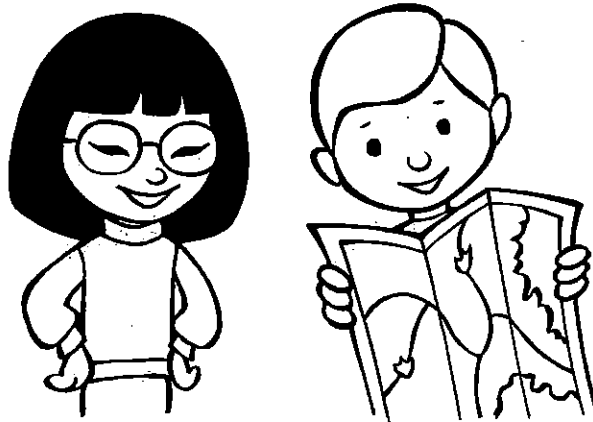
- **Desk area** – A child may not like other students to be close to his/her desk.
- **Cafeteria** – A child may stand in line or eat too close to others.
- **Playground** – A child may stand too far from others and not be able to easily participate in a game.
- **Library** – A child may want to sit 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](#)

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