



# Research Brief

A SUMMARY OF A PUBLISHED RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Tactile Defensiveness and Stereotyped Behaviors

By G. T. Baranek, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA, L. G. Foster, Ph.D., and G. Berkson, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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This study examined the relationship between stereotyped behaviors (e.g., repetitive behaviors like rocking, flapping, spinning, banging toys or other objects) and tactile defensiveness in children with developmental disabilities.

Clinical observations suggest that these two symptoms occur together. Stereotyped behaviors typically involve repetitive motor patterns (e.g., body rocking, flapping), unusual object manipulation (e.g., spinning objects), and focused interests. These interests can include behaviors such as focused affections (e.g., child likes red clothes or green foods), rituals (e.g., turning around three times before sitting down), and other behavioral rigidities (e.g., insistence on sameness, predictability). Tactile defensiveness is an over-sensitivity to touch that most people would find non-threatening. Individuals exhibiting tactile defensiveness may avoid or withdraw from the stimulation (e.g., negative emotional reaction, rubbing

where the stimulus occurred, avoiding the texture).

The participants in this study were 28 children with autism and related developmental disorders. Teachers completed a stereotyped behavior checklist, and the participants were assessed on three different measures of tactile defensiveness. The findings suggest that tactile defensiveness and stereotyped behaviors often occur together in children with developmental disabilities. The individuals with higher levels of tactile defensiveness tended to show more stereotyped behaviors. These behaviors tended to be more rigid behaviors (e.g., repetition of a particular behavior, intolerance to change) rather than movement behaviors (e.g., body rocking). While the nature of the relationship between tactile defensiveness and stereotyped behaviors is not fully understood, perhaps being overly sensitive to certain touch stimulation predisposes one to become less flexible and more insistent on predictability, repetition, and routine.

This research brief is based on the article *Tactile defensiveness and stereotyped behaviors*, by Baranek, G. T., Foster, L. G., & Berkson, G. (1997) in *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 51(2), 91-95.