

## Tips for Teachers

### The Main Event

This month our topic is **Personal Space**. In this issue, Sarah Bergstrom, an autism resource specialist, is our guest author; she has written The Main Event.

#### Good ideas for teaching students to better understand these social concepts include:

- Discuss when and how problems of personal space can get you in trouble.
- Have students do a personal space treasure hunt. Have them observe the space between others in various situations in real life or while watching TV. List the people, the level of personal space between them (intimate, personal, social, or public) and describe the situation. Have the students guess their relationship. Are they parent and child, boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife, teacher and student, person and stranger?
- List public places where awareness of personal space is important. Look for methods in the environment that help mark personal space: lanes in a swimming pool, chair arms in a movie theater or on an airplane, door or cubicles in a restroom, line dividers in a cafeteria, lines on the parking lot, etc. Discuss problems that might occur if someone breaks the personal space rule in these situations.
- Role-play situations of comfortable and uncomfortable personal space in various environments.
- On a long roll of paper or a long strip of masking tape, have students draw what they estimate is the appropriate distances for intimate, personal, social, and public space. Then measure and see how close they were to the measurements suggested in the Main Event article.
- Write relationships on cards (mother, father, brother, sister, teacher, stranger, friend, etc.) and role-play a social interaction involving the various relationships. Have others in the group observe and guess the relationship.

I am Kari Dunn Buron,  
a teacher from Minnesota,  
and I just love this magazine!



You betcha.

# Departments

## I Second That Emotion!:

This issue's scale is a sadness scale.

- Generate ideas for each level of the scale.
- Explain that what might be a very sad (4) event to one person might only be a little sad (2) to another.
- Discuss why it is important to know how different people feel about different events.

## Coming to Our Senses:

The topic in this issue is called Space Invaders; it was submitted by Jennifer Veenendall, an occupational therapist.

- Ask students if they know of anyone who has a personal space issue.
- Ask if anyone has ever told them that they were too close or too loud? Were they surprised?
- Discuss how being too loud can count as being a space invader.
- What about someone playing loud music (like in their car), is this a space invader?

## Gets-It Knows!:

- Ask your students if this letter made them giggle or feel uncomfortable?
- Explore why they think it hard for people to talk about "passing gas"?
- Discuss how some people might make a big deal about it because they are embarrassed.
- Discuss embarrassment in general and how it can make people behave.
- Discuss this statement: Passing gas is a natural thing, not bad and not really funny.

**Remember to send letters from your group to [rogergetsit@asperger.net](mailto:rogergetsit@asperger.net).**

## Something to Talk About:

- Explore why a person might become defensive if somebody tells him that he needs a shower?
- Discuss some of the important things about being clean?
- Point out to students that other people can smell them before they can smell themselves?

## The Cartoon:

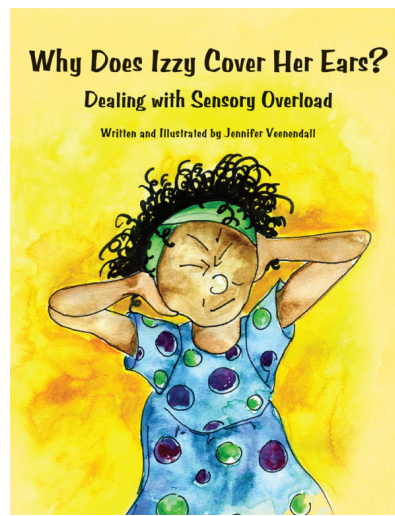
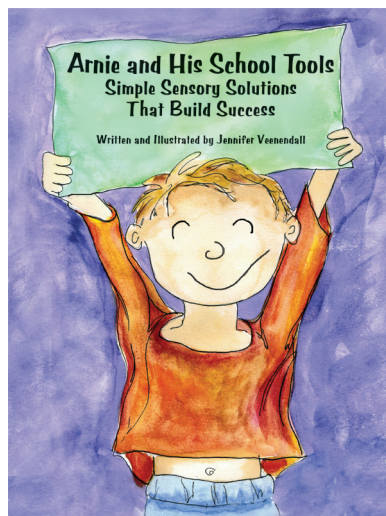
**(NOTE: The abstract nature of the cartoon is purposeful. Social rules and faux pas are subtle, and this activity gives students and opportunity to analyze the social information, point by point. It is expected that the teacher or group leader will support the discussion using the following prompt questions.):**

- What is funny or odd about this cartoon?
- Why do you think the other boys are ignoring the boy who is talking?
- Is the bathroom a place to hang out and talk? When is it O.K. to talk in the bathroom? Why might this be a bad idea?

## ***Contributors to This Issue***

**Sarah Bergstrom** is the autism resource specialist for early childhood special education and elementary schools for Edina Public Schools in Minnesota. Sarah has elementary and special education degrees from Gustavus Adolphus College, a master's degree from the University of Minnesota, and certificate in autism spectrum disorders from Hamline University. She has worked in the field of special education since 1983 and also teaches a graduate class for Hamline University on Asperger Syndrome. She has held leadership positions in the Minnesota State Autism Network and the West Metro Subregional Autism Network and facilitates the Minnesota ASD listserv.

**Jennifer Veenendall** is a school-based occupational therapist in West St. Paul, Minnesota. Working with students with a wide range of abilities, she is especially passionate about creating learning environments that meet students' sensory processing needs. Jennifer received her occupational therapy degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and her master's degree in human development from St. Mary's University of Minnesota. She lives in Hudson, Wisconsin, with her husband, Scott, and their two children, Anna and Benjamin. When she is not working, Jennifer enjoys spending time with her family at their cabin as well as drawing and painting. Jennifer is the author of *Arnie and His School Tools*, *Sensory Solutions That Build Success* and *Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears? Dealing with Sensory Overload*.



## Teacher Handout

### Understanding and addressing problems of *personal space* in students with social cognitive problems:

*Dyssemia* is the word used to describe a disability involving nonverbal social communication. This problem involves many challenges in social behavior, including a social distance or personal space. Most students who have problems with personal distance are truly unable to judge how far or how close they should be to someone else.

Think for a minute about how you understand personal space. If you approach someone to have a casual conversation, you automatically stop when you feel you have gotten close enough for the other person. How do you do that? Actually, we don't really know, but somewhere in your brain a signal went off that said "close enough." For students with problems of dyssemia, this signal does not work effectively. As a result, they either stand too far away or come in too close, oblivious to the unspoken responses of other people.

This is a difficult concept to teach since we all learned the skill very early in life so it has become second nature to us.

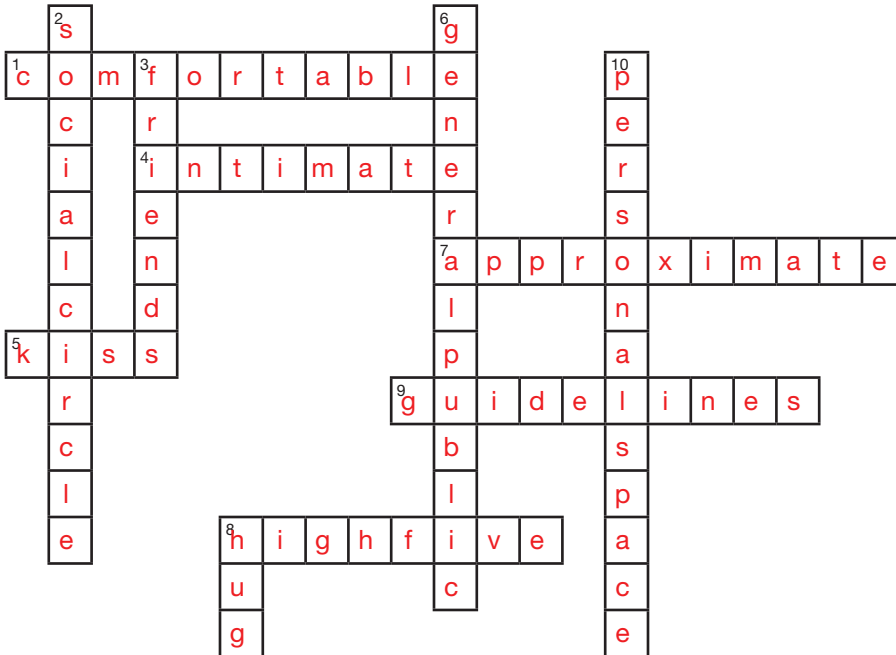
- **Remember that personal distance issues come naturally to most school-aged students.** If your student has difficulty in this area, chances are there is a problem of social cognition. This means it is not simply a "behavior problem" but is a cognitive issue needing direct instruction.
- **Discuss the issue with your student in a nonjudgmental way.** Come up with a plan that you can both live with. For example, you might tell the student that you know she doesn't mean to stand too close and that you can help her remember by putting up your hand in the universal "stop" gesture. This could be a silent reminder for her to stop and think about how close she is getting.
- **Be nonjudging in your approach to personal space if you want your student to respond positively to your instruction.** Chances are many people have "corrected" the student or simply told her she is too close. If the problem is continuing, these past strategies clearly have not worked, and part of the problem might be that the student is responding defensively because she has no idea what she is missing. For this reason, very direct and gentle teaching can be more successful.

# Personal Space – Word Search Answers



**Word Bank:** FAMILY, FRUSTRATING, INTIMATE, PERSONAL, PUBLIC, SOCIAL, SPACE, TRICKY

# Personal Space – Crossword Answers



## ACROSS

- 1) a good feeling; the way you feel when there is the correct distance between you and someone else
- 4) a word that means very close; like a parent
- 5) something you usually only give to someone who is intimate with you
- 7) not an exact measure
- 8) two words: like a handshake; two people touching the palms of their hands
- 9) general rules to follow; not laws

## DOWN

- 2) two words: these are the people you hang out with at school
- 3) people you hang out with who you really like and who really like you
- 6) two words: people you don't really know, but who you might see in your daily life
- 8) something you might give a good friend
- 10) two words: the space between you and another person

# Personal Space – Quiz

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) True or False? Personal space is the space between people.
  - A) True
  - B) False
  
- 2) True or False? If you are talking with someone you don't know very well, but who you know socially, it is good to stand about 4 feet apart.
  - A) True
  - B) False
  
- 3) True or False? You should stand closer to strangers than you do to friends.
  - A) True
  - B) False
  
- 4) True or False? Intimate distance means being really close.
  - A) True
  - B) False
  
- 5) True or False? Sometimes there are situations, like in elevators or standing in line, when you might need to stand close to strangers.
  - A) True
  - B) False
  
- 6) Match the personal space suggestion with the correct group of people.

_____ 12 feet or more	a) intimate relationships
_____ 18 inches to 4 feet	b) Social relationships
_____ 4 feet to 12 feet	c) general public
_____ zero to 18 inches	d) personal relationships

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