

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF TOUCH**

**Liz Victor**

From birth until the age of 7, children learn primarily by means of sensation. This is the reason that they put everything into their mouths, touch everything, fiddle with everything, and watch everything that goes on around them. The brain functions as a computer - everything that is felt or experienced by the baby or child enters the brain (input), and is processed to establish its meaning. Once the information has been processed, the child can then act on that information in a meaningful way (output). This input - processing - output system is generally on a subconscious level, and is happening all the time. An example of this would be someone putting their hand on a hot stove. The tactile (touch) system sends a message to the brain that it is feeling something hot, the brain processes this, and sends a message to the hand to get off quickly before getting burnt.

The child's brain is receiving messages from all the various senses at the same time through hearing, taste, smell, sight and touch. It is also constantly receiving information regarding the child's position in space, and his/her movements. All this sensory information gives the child the sense of knowing who and where he/she is in relation to the world around him/her.

The skin is the largest organ in the body, which gives some indication in terms of its importance as a sensory organ. Babies naturally require touch to develop - from the time they are born they require cuddles, kisses and contact from familiar people. Later on they rely on touch when learning how things feel, how things work, and how things fit together. Touch is important when learning to handle tools, such as cutting with a pair of scissors, or writing with a pen. One needs to be able to feel how firmly to hold things in order to use them, while not holding them so firmly that they break.

Exposing your child to different tactile sensory input is vital to his/her development in this area. Allowing them to feel different textures on their bodies, or to manipulate different objects with their hands, enriches their experience of the world around them. Talk about what they're feeling - if they're stroking a cat comment on how soft she is, or how rough the tree's bark is. Make textured pictures using things like cotton wool, string, polystyrene, tissue paper, etc. Allow your child to play with messy substances - give them finger paint or play dough. Make up a big bowl of jelly on a hot summer's day, and watch them get stuck in. Playing in sand or in water also provides tactile experience.

Children follow their parents' examples, so encouraging them to take part in tactile activities often means that you need to get stuck in too. Make it fun, and be enthusiastic. Do it somewhere where they can feel free to make a mess, and provide cloths or water to clean up afterwards - it's all part of the experience. Have fun!!!