

Let the fun begin!

Communicating through touch the Tacpac™ way

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Eye Contact 39 (RNIB journal), Summer 2004, pp.31-34

The Tacpac™ approach encourages children to explore the feel of different textures against the body, to the accompaniment of changing musical pieces. Anna Panter regularly uses Tacpac™ sessions with children who have profound and multiple disabilities in her nursery and has found it's enabled her to build a greater understanding of the children she works with.

The scene is set, Jennifer is lying on the nursery floor in her nappy, covered in a yellow aertex blanket. Poised beside her is her learning support assistant surrounded by a variety of objects that can be found in most households such as spatulas, pan scourers, washing mops and a fan. All is quiet in anticipation. Then the music begins, the assistant raises her hand and flicks open the Spanish looking fan. As wafted air floats over Jennifer's body she becomes animated, begins to vocalise with delight, and a huge smile lights up her face. For Jennifer, who is totally blind and has learning disabilities, the enjoyment has only just begun!

What is TACPAC™?

The 'Tac' stands for Tactile Approach to Communication. The Tacpac™ collection is made up of three packs, each consisting of a music tape, a booklet about setting up sessions, and a list of items with very varying textures (about six in total) commonly found in the household/store cupboard etc.

Tacpac™ was developed over ten years ago by three teachers working with a range of children with special educational needs (particularly with children who had profound and multiple learning difficulties), in special schools in London. The teachers found that some of the children they were working with weren't able to move to the music in the existing music sessions. They devised a method of touching different textures to the children's bodies to the rhythm of improvised music. And the children loved it!

Using Tacpac™ at Mabel Prichard School

Mabel Prichard is a school for children aged from 2-16 who, have a variety of special and complex educational needs. We use TACPAC in our school with children across all ages who have profound and multiple learning difficulties, including those who also have sensory disabilities.

The aim of Tacpac™ is to heighten levels of awareness and arousal and to promote responses to stimuli. For many of the children we work with, touch and responding to touch may be a primary means of connecting and communicating with others. The Tacpac™ method really helps to create a bond with these children - it helps us to build on awareness of each other, and of likes and dislikes etc. Each session in fact becomes a journey of discovery.

The music is an important element of Tacpac™. It varies from being exhilarating, vibrant and pulsating to being serene and tranquil; and the changing pace and mood reflects what we are doing with the children and how we use the textures as a stimuli. The music entwines this whole tactile approach, and without it I feel, the tactile stimulation would not have the same impact.

Sessions, like the one with Jennifer mentioned earlier, take place in a fun and relaxed manner within our assessment nursery with children ranging from 2 to 5 years of age. But TACPAC is also used with older children within the school, either on an individual basis tailored to meet the specific needs of a child ie as a way of working with James who has autism to help decrease his tactile defensiveness, or as part of a structured curriculum as with our teenage students on our secondary site.

Generally in the nursery a session takes about 30-45 minutes although sessions can be as long or as short as you want (the tape itself is only 20 minutes long). It will depend on the individual child and with some children you may want to start slowly introducing the textures and build up to longer sessions over time. The most important element is that the whole tactile experience is enjoyable and fun.

Sessions take place on a regular weekly basis as part of our sensory curriculum, which means both the staff and the children begin to anticipate the sessions. We also keep to the same pack list of objects for a number of weeks: the repetition gives each child time to learn to anticipate and enjoy what is coming next.

Example session with Tacpac™ (pack 3)

Once we have set the scene by laying out our objects and textures, and prepared the children by gently undressing them, and covering them up with a blanket, we begin our session in the nursery by singing our hello song. We also use an object of reference (soft material on card) to show each child that it is time for Tacpac™ and we're ready to begin.

- The first piece of music starts off with the piano playing slowly whilst the child is brushed with chamois leather; then we also hear the guitar as the child is draped lightly with silk fabric. We return to the chamois when the music reverts to the piano. This sets a mood of tranquillity as the chamois and silk fabric floats over their bodies.

During the pauses between each piece of music we cover the child with the blanket and keep very close contact with them. It is a time for the child to reflect and note that the music has finished.

- The next music we hear has more definite tapping sounds with short brisk notes enabling us to make specific dabbing movements with a pastry brush with care taken as we dab more gently around the head and face.
- The third section of music is "tinglier" with a Middle Eastern feel to it and the sound of sitars. To this we roll pouches of marbles up and down the children's bodies moving every which way.

- Next three different instruments accompany our rhythm with hands. We massage the child with our palms to the bass drum beat, as the rhythm changes to the Gato drum we use a different level of pressure with our knuckles, and then as the chimes come in we skip lightly with our fingertips. The idea here is that using different parts of our hands at varying pressures reaches different receptors under the skin.
- Next the chains! The first refrain has strong, military beats where we lower the chain on to the child's body, remove it and then repeat the process. There is a change of pace as we move to a light softer piece of music with the piano, when we drape and trail the chains softly across the body.
- Finally relaxation with the feather dusters to a calm gentle piece of music, sounding like water drops dripping from a leaf after the rain. Quite serene and tranquil.

Recording responses

The responses of the children I work with can range from laughter, giggling, vocalisation, eye contact, calmness, to a sense of puzzlement, a look of discord or rejection. Many children's responses are at a pre-intentional level, but staff work very closely in one to one sessions with the children in order to get to understand and interpret these responses. It is important to take the time to understand that a reaction is to a texture and not just to a new experience. Staff are able to build up a pattern of knowledge of likes and dislikes in order to assign "meaning".

By observing and recording children's responses to the texture stimuli on a regular basis, I can build up a picture of reactions and note any patterns of change over a period of time. For a child, who is tactile defensive, finding a texture, which may not be so objectionable, may well be the beginning of pleasurable tactile experience that could be built upon.

Body awareness

Tacpac™ sessions help pupils to develop self-perception and body-awareness and gain a greater understanding of how their body fits into an environment that has objects and other people in it. Edward who is 3.5 years old and has profound and multiple learning difficulties and a visual impairment had a marked reaction to having chains lightly draped over his body, down and across one side to the other. His body stilled, and his good right eye tracked the movement as he felt the chain on its journey all over his body.

Recently a new teacher to our team, Steve Pussey, made these observations after using Tacpac™ with his class of teenagers on our secondary site. "Being new in the field I feel it fits in with the idea of the power of music and touch as an instrument for positive engagement, a key to unlocking communicative responses. It's like trying to find the right buttons and then the adult interprets these communicative and enjoyment responses as having meaning."

Well here I go again, off on another home visit to explain to parents why we enjoy dropping chains, rolling marbles, flickering washing up mops, squashing scouring pads, and rolling paint rollers over their children oil in the name of learning and FUN!

Tacpac™ is often used in schools, but it would be great to see it being utilised by the wider community ie Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language therapists, and more specifically by parents and siblings of children with special needs as a "fun" and enjoyable way of developing awareness and building communicative relationships within the family.

Recording of responses after a session with TACPAC: Example chart

	Chamois/Silk	Pastry brush	Marbles
Hadi	Likes the chamois, but not silk. Pushed it away.	Enjoyed this. Very smiley.	Didn't like them, could not tolerate on lower limbs
Edward	Likes both. But noticed difference. Preferred silk, more relaxed.	Thoroughly enjoyed this. Likes dabbing movement.	Enjoyed, became very vocal.
Jennifer	Sitting up gently rocking as both textures moved over body.	Much more responsive and animated. Liked dabbing.	Arms flapping to music. Quite liked the marbles.
Josh	Not keen on chamois /silk. Pushed chamois away tolerated silk.	Loved it on his feet laughing/ giggling.	Concentrated on where they were being put and then pushed away.
	Hands/fingers	Chains	Dusters
Hadi	Preferred fingertips all over body.	Serious look, couldn't quite make out what was happening.	Serious not keen on soles of feet. Pulled away.
Edward	Not sure of kneading with knuckles but liked the fingertips.	Quieter, very still but was it due to music or unsure of chains?	Sat up and enjoyed it on his back - ticklish.
Jennifer	Stilled with palms and knuckles but more responsive to fingertips tapping over her.	Not sure, pushed them away.	Very responsive laughing and giggling arms flapping.
Josh	Liked all the hand movements but preferred fingertips.	Puzzled at first. Liked the chain being draped over body.	Completely relaxed and enjoyed it.

To find out more about TACPAC™

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