# Autism and Touch – The Princess and the Pea

April 10, 2015 by [Stella Waterhouse](http://www.autismdailynewscast.com/author/stellawaterhouse/)

Did your baby arch away from you when you held her or tried to feed her? Or your toddler rush away to avoid that hug? Does she hate to have her hair combed or brushed? Or does she insist on wearing the same clothes time and again – or take them off at every opportunity? Such behaviors are not simply ‘autistic’ fads. They arise from some degree of tactile hypersensitivity.

Those of you brought up on fairytales may remember the story of The Princess and the Pea in which the princess proved that she was of royal blood by being unable to sleep when a dried pea was put in her bed – hidden beneath 20 mattresses.

Unfortunately such sensitivities are not confined to the realm of fantasy nor a sign of royal blood, but instead affect a whole range of people being most severe in people with ASD. Sadly that means that normally pleasant stimuli feel painful and, to make matters worse, go on and on and on, as the accounts of people with ASD themselves show – irrespective of where in the world they live, or their age or circumstance.

Thus in her first book [*Emergence – Labelled Autistic*](http://www.amazon.com/Emergence-Labeled-Autistic-Temple-Grandin/dp/0446671827?tag=uphillgroup-20&linkCode=ptl&linkId=6076fb37e44e84e40934acd1091957f0) Temple Grandin gave a clear insight into her unusual sensory experiences. She talked about her longing to be touched and hugged even though she found such things physically painful. She also gave a comical description of ‘one very, very overweight aunt’ whom she liked immensely but who ‘totally engulfed’ her, causing her to panic because she felt ‘it was like being suffocated by a mountain of marsh-mallows.’

Then there is Donna Williams who in her first autobiography [*Nobody Nowhere*](http://www.amazon.com/Nobody-Nowhere-Donna-Williams-Summary-ebook/dp/B005ZI0Z3O?tag=uphillgroup-20&linkCode=ptl&linkId=2b6ce4a42e663879e1c2ac3d49cc6b45), tells us that she hated being hugged because it ‘felt like I was being burned.’

Swedish author Gunilla Gerland also details severe problems in her autobiography [*A Real Person: Life on the Outside*](http://www.amazon.com/A-Real-Person-Life-Outside/dp/0285636626?tag=uphillgroup-20&linkCode=ptl&linkId=e601fcb274a08cf515c1bea13824dd05).  Not only did her exceptional sensitivity stop her from showering – because the drops of water ‘had sharp little points that stabbed,’ but, from about the age of 8, she began to get a burning feeling on her head and neck so that whenever her hair was brushed or combed her hair and even the inside of her ears hurt.

Ros Blackburn too tells the tale of how she was sitting in a lecture when the handbag of a woman walking along the aisle behind her, brushed lightly against Ros’s back. The lightest of touches; like a feather. And yet Ros continued to feel that touch (and be distracted by it) for about three hours.

That hypersensitivity can also have unexpected results as we learn from an Italian man simply known as Alberto, an account of whose life forms part of Douglas Biklen’s anthology [*Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*](http://www.amazon.com/Autism-Person-Qualitative-Studies-Psychology/dp/0814799280?tag=uphillgroup-20&linkCode=ptl&linkId=723fb4b521ab38c2f73f30cf8791da81). Alberto has spent his life ‘fighting sensorial distortions’ something he illustrates this by telling us how hard it was to play a ball game with his mother. Why so? Simply because, although he liked the idea, the idea of touching anything – even a ball – was so awful that he simply froze. Imagine just how awful that must be.

Are there any compensations at all? Certainly that hyper-sensitivity can sometimes create a fascination (or even a fixation) with various textures from the links on a chain to other people’s hair. Even so such fascinations can be double-edged and have the potential to cause problems as the child grows up. Perhaps it is fortunate that by that time many people with ASD have developed ways of coping with their hypersensitivity.

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**Top Tips**

\* Make everyone in the family aware of his hypersensitivity.
\* Do not hug her or him unless she or he is expecting it.
\* Check that clothes do not have ‘prickly’ labels or scratchy stitching.
\* Work out which clothes he finds most comfortable and buy more than one of each item.
\* Wash new clothes, sheets, etc. before use to help soften them – or buy specially manufactured soft/seamless clothes.
\* Wear moccasins instead of shoes.
\* Make putting dirty clothes in the wash and choosing clothes for the following day a bedtime routine.

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That’s a taste of hypersensitivity. Next time we’ll explore the opposite: hyposensitivity.