

# ***Help Children Understand Personal Space***



**8 Activities That Make Personal Space  
Less Abstract!**

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I've always been a proponent of helping children understand the concept of personal space – that is, the area immediately surrounding their body. If we want children to be able to travel safely about the classroom or playground, and to have chaos- and accident-free movement experiences – their own and others'!

Naturally, this is necessary for everyday life. Someone without a sense of personal space will bump into objects and



others. They'll be the "close talkers." They may even have trouble maneuvering shopping carts down grocery store aisles!

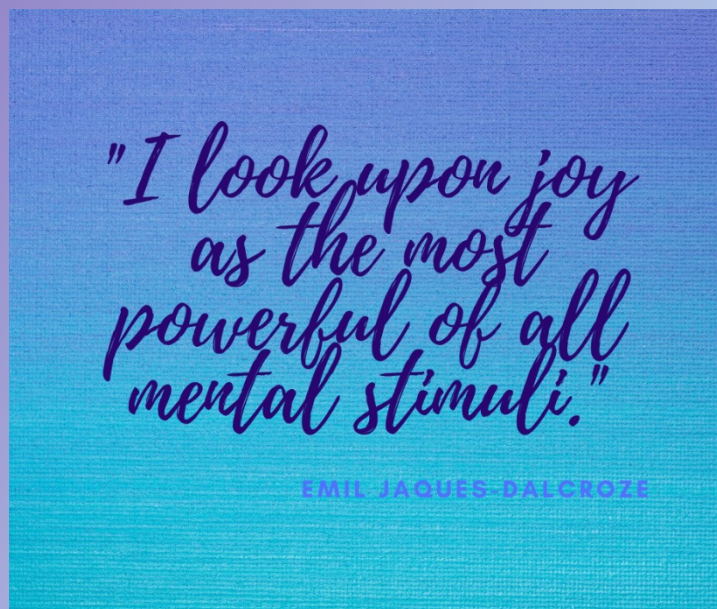
But, with the arrival of Covid 19 and concerns about children maintaining physical distance upon returning to school or child care, an understanding of and respect for personal space is more necessary than ever. *Social distancing* is a term that is far too abstract for the little ones. Nor do they

understand the meaning of "6 feet apart." And we all know how important physical contact and closeness are to young children. They want to play with, wrestle with, and hug each other!

So, how do we help them learn to maintain at least *some* physical distance? The same way we do everything else: We put ourselves in their shoes! What provides incentive for a child to do anything? Fun! For example, I read one article in which the children made “airplane” arms when standing in line or moving from place to place. That’s *much* more fun than being instructed to stand a certain distance apart!

In the same way, if we offer them developmentally appropriate, engaging ideas and activities that teach the concept of personal space, the children will come to understand it. And because they’ll be engaging multiple senses (i.e., engaging in active learning), their understanding of personal space will be long-lasting and meaningful.

Following are several ideas for actively and joyfully learning about personal space.





# The Bubble



This activity requires the children to stand on a carpet square, on a poly spot, or inside a plastic hoop (hoops are a great visual reminder of personal space!) and to imagine they're each inside their own giant bubble. Invite them to "paint" the inside of their bubbles without stepping off the carpet square or out of the hoop. Explain that what they're creating is their own personal space.

This simple activity requires the children to consider the extent of the space immediately surrounding them. It has the added bonus of granting them ownership of that space because it's something they've "created" themselves. That means they'll be more likely to want to preserve it and they'll be more inclined to respect the personal space of others. In other words, it gives them less incentive to "crash and go boom."



## **What I Can Do in My Bubble**

Once the children have painted the inside of their bubbles, you can present the following challenges:

- Show me how low you can get inside your bubble.
- Stay very low, and move your arms all around your bubble. (Encourage them to try different ways of doing this.)
- Show me how high up you can get while staying inside your bubble. Find a way to get very high with your feet still on the floor. Now find a way with your feet coming off the floor.
- Move your body so it's between very high and very low. Now move your arms in as many ways as possible all around your body.
- Move your feet so they're far apart but still inside your bubble. Show me how wide you can make our whole body while still inside your bubble.

## Exploring Up & Down

This is another activity that helps children determine their personal space. For an initial exploration of the levels in space, pose these questions and movement challenges:

- Do you know what “up” and “down” mean? Show me with your body.
- Show me you can make your body go all the way down. All the way up.
- How high up can you get?
- Show me you can go down halfway.
- Make yourself so tiny I can hardly see you.
- Show me you can become as huge as a giant.
- Now pretend your feet are glued to the floor! Show me you can move your body up and down without moving those feet!



## **“Head, Shoulders, Knees, & Toes”**



You may think of Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes as a body-part activity – or just a fun song – but it also requires the children to move their hands from the top to the bottom of their body. This offers additional experience with the various levels of one’s personal space: high, middle, and low.



## Stretch & Bend!



Nonlocomotor skills, because they take place in one spot, are perfect for an exploration of personal space. And two of the most commonly used nonlocomotor skills are bending and stretching. This activity explores both using imagery children can relate to!

- Stretch as though picking fruit from a tall tree.
- Flop like a rag doll.
- Stretch as though waking up and yawning.
- Bend over as though tying your shoes.
- Stretch to put something on a high shelf.
- Bend to pat a dog, and then ac at.
- Stretch to shoot a basketball through a hoop.
- Bend to pick flowers or veggies from the garden.
- Stretch to pluck a star from the sky!



## Let's Shake!



Shaking is a nonlocomotor skill the children definitely enjoy. With this activity they'll discover they can shake various body parts, as well as the whole body, at different levels in space. Invite them to do the following:

- Shake your whole body.
- Sit and shake just one hand; the other; both together.
- Shake your hands in front of you; to either side; up high; down low.
- Find another part of your body to shake. Then another.
- Kneeling, find two different parts of your body you can shake.
- Is it easier or harder to shake while lying on your tummy?

# Taking Personal Space Through Shared Space

Naturally, it's more difficult to help children understand that they maintain their personal space while traveling through the classroom or playground area. But you can help make the concept less abstract by giving each child a hoop to hold around the waist as they move. The hoop serves as a physical manifestation of their personal space. (In the absence of hoops you can ask the children to move with their arms extended to the sides, like "airplane arms.") You just need to remind them that they're not to get close enough for their hoops or hands to touch.



Of course, children do love to crash and go boom. So it can be helpful to remind them that even though cars on a highway move together, they never get close enough to touch. The goal is for them to move in a similar way.

## Shrinking Room



When the children have had plenty of experience with the kind of activity described on the previous page, and can demonstrate that they understand and respect the personal space of their classmates, you can play a game called Shrinking Room.

Here the children once again are invited to move with hoops around their waists – or hands out to the sides. But this time you act as a moveable wall by standing with your own arms out to *your* sides. Begin at one end of the room, allowing the children the greatest amount of space in which to move. Then, every couple of minutes, take a step or two forward, thereby shrinking the space available. Despite the increasingly limited space, the goal is for the children to continue to move without touching anyone else's hoop (or hands). Always stop while the children are still able to experience success!

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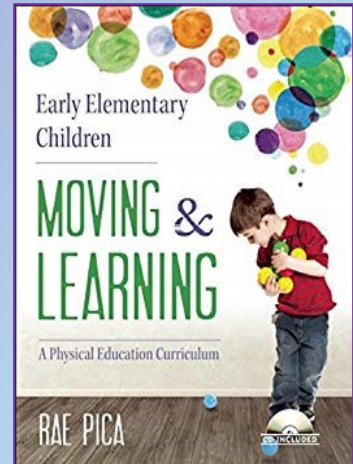
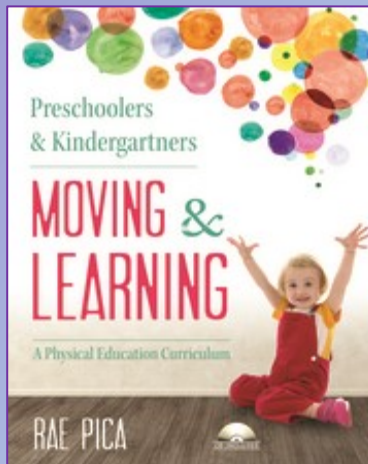
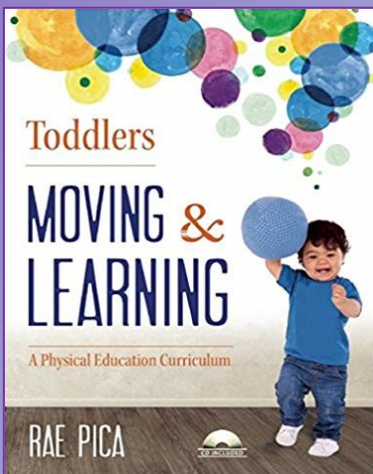
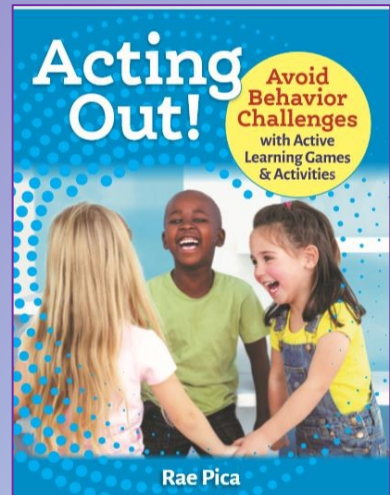
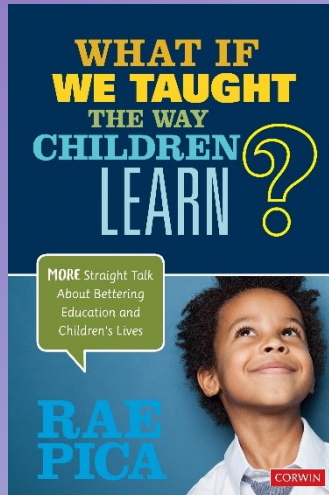
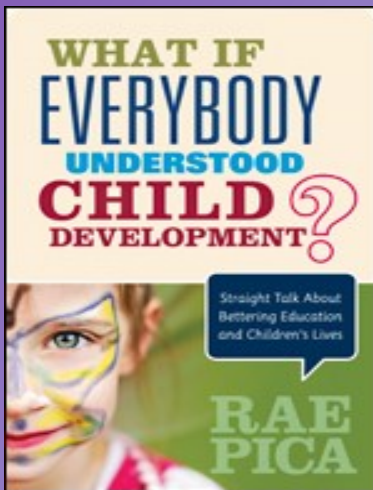
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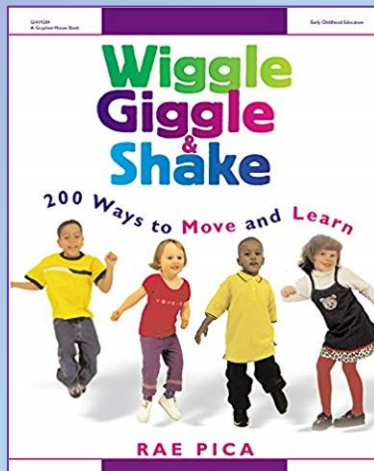
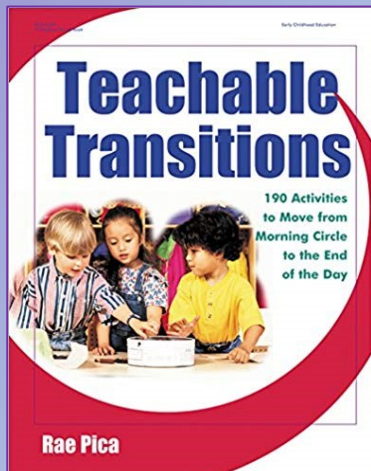
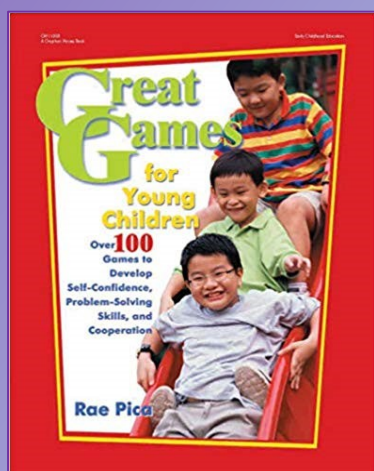
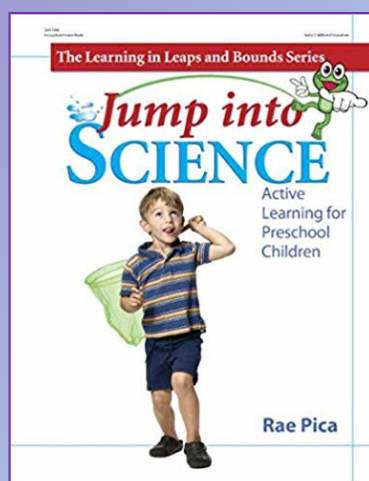
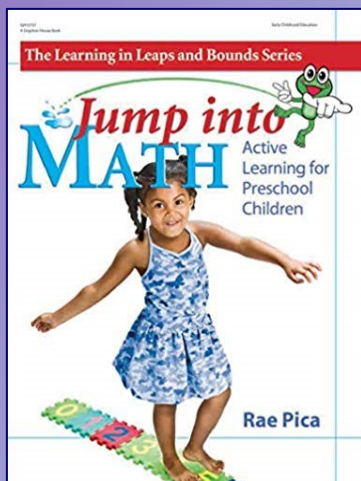
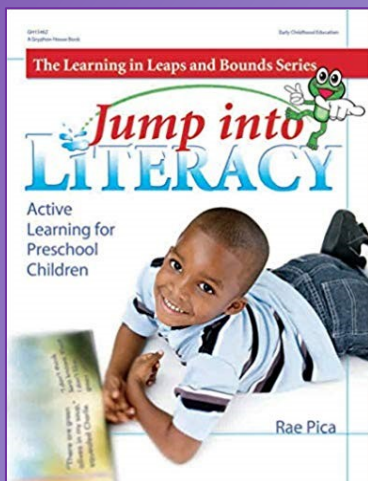
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# RAE PICA



Rae Pica has been an early childhood education consultant since 1980. Dedicated to developing and educating the whole child, Rae is the author of 21 books, including the text, *Experiences in Movement & Music* (in its 5<sup>th</sup> edition) and two of her latest books, *What If We Taught the Way Children Learn?: More Straight Talk About Bettering Education and Children's Lives* and *Acting Out! Avoid Behavior Challenges with Active Learning Games & Activities*.

Rae is a former adjunct instructor for the University of New Hampshire and is currently a blogger, online course creator, and popular presenter, both virtually and in person. The National Association for Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care, state WIC organizations, Eric Jensen's Learning Brain Expo, universities and colleges, and education conferences, resource and referral agencies, and schools in 46 states and Canada are among those who have invited Rae to address their groups.

As a consultant, Rae has shared her expertise with such groups as

- ✓ Sesame Street Research Department
- ✓ Head Start Bureau
- ✓ Centers for Disease Control
- ✓ President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports
- ✓ Nickelodeon's *Blue's Clues*
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