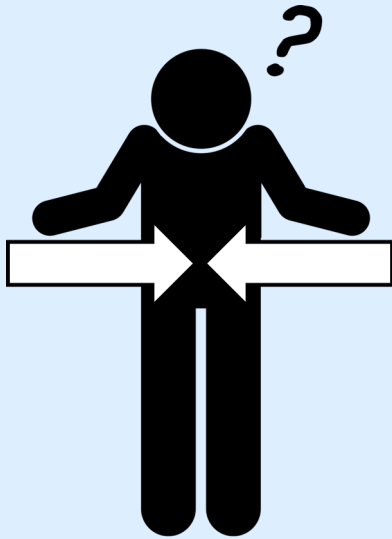


# Too close & Too far



Exploring personal space and personal distance for  
young people with ASD

Age 8 to young adult

Joel Shaul

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# Introduction

Young people with autism face great challenges as they sort out the mysteries of personal space and social distance in their lives. The unwritten rules governing proximity and touching are extremely complicated. Expectations change in accordance with age, gender and many variables in the social context. Many children with ASD need the help of parents, teachers and therapists to help figure it all out.

Some of the many reasons for personal space confusion include:

- \*Theory of mind deficits that affect the child's ability to predict how others are responding to the child's proximity, distance or touch
- \*Sensory aversion that makes the child withdraw from things that bother their senses
- \*Sensory seeking of stimulation from touch, hugging, physical pressure
- \*Enthrallment with inner thoughts affecting situational awareness
- \*Inadequate awareness of personal space norms pertaining to factors such as age, gender and social hierarchy.

Neurotypical family members and peers are also capable of making mistakes involving personal space.

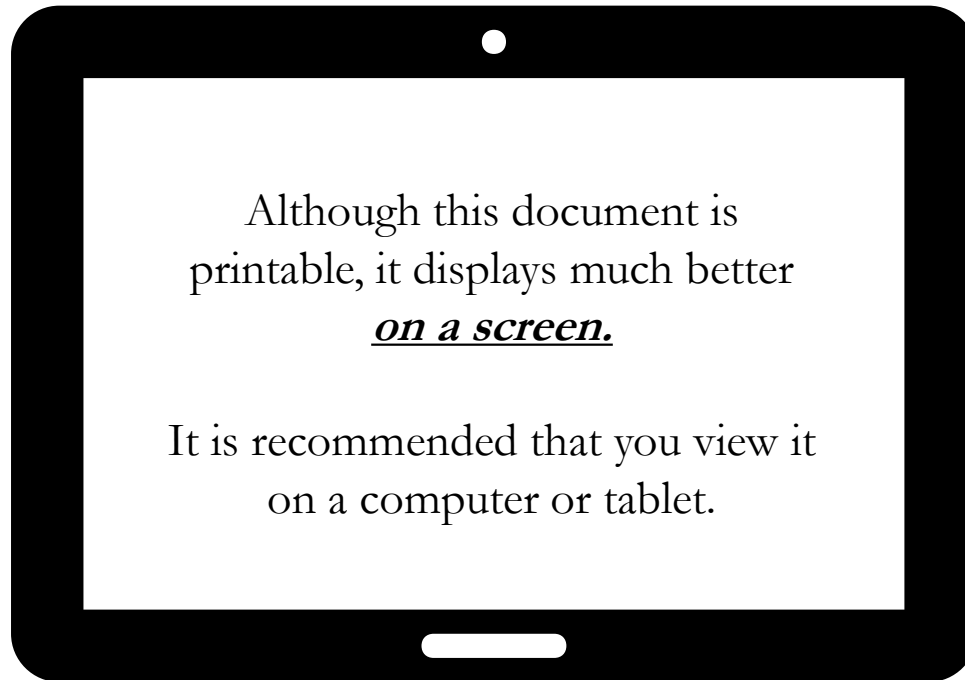
We all at times unintentionally get too close to others or too far away. Friends and family members of a child with autism might commit personal space oversights by failing to adequately recognize an autistic individual's legitimate need for quiet, rest, a hug or other accommodations.

I created this book to help young people with autism, along with their families, teachers and therapists, to work on some common personal space problems. It is designed to be read with an adult. Adequate time should be allotted for discussion. You will notice that for many of the scenarios, the solutions are complicated and there may be more than one "right" answer. Teenagers can go through the entire book, but if you are reading it with a younger child, you may consider skipping over some of the pages that pertain exclusively to teens.

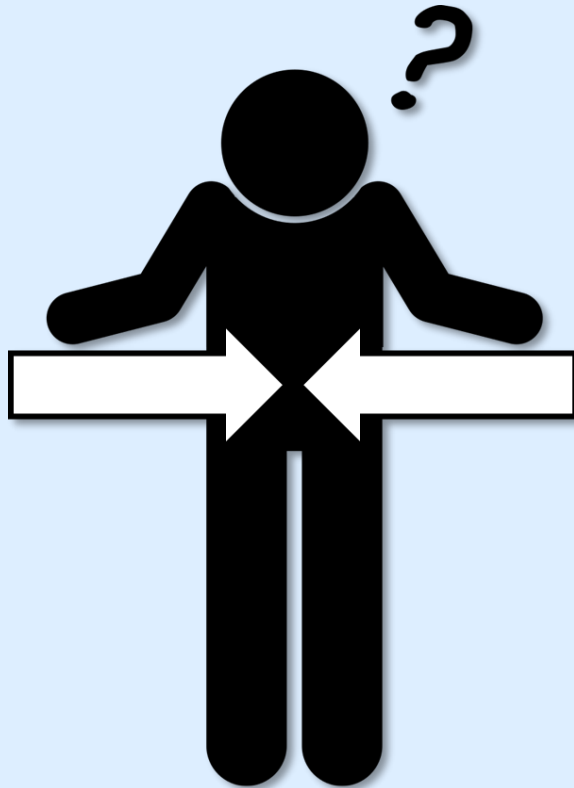
This resource is available for free download on my website. You can "pay me back" by emailing me any suggestions you might have for personal space concerns I might have missed. This may assist me if there is a need for revisions in any later edition.

**Joel Shaul, LCSW**  
**autismteachingstrategies.com**

# How to view this book



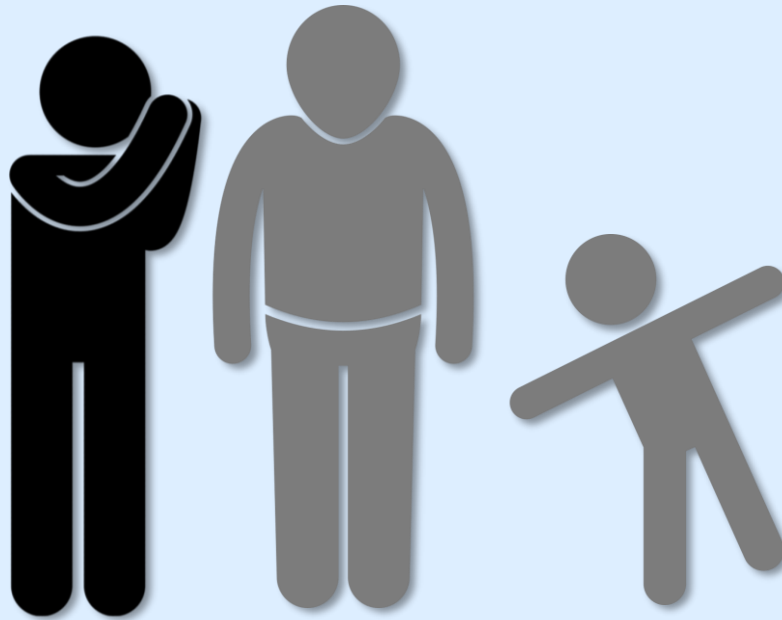
Part one:  
Too close



At the family reunion, Jeff loves the feeling of hugging and being hugged. It makes him feel loved and relaxed.

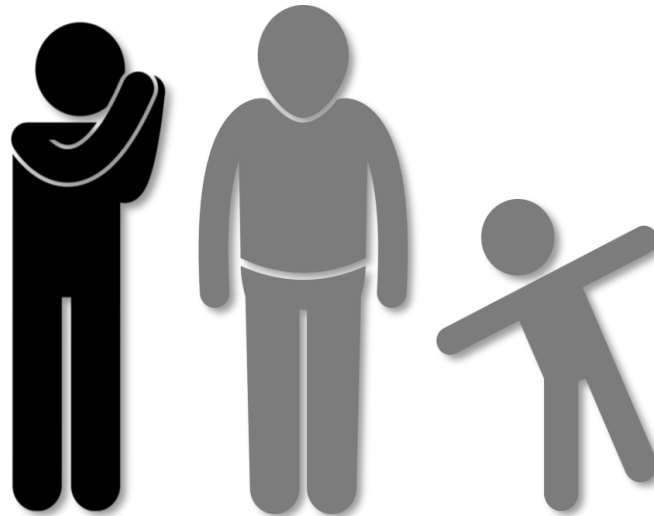


At age 14, Jeff is getting big and strong. Jeff still enjoys giving everyone a strong, tight hug, including his 3-year-old niece and his 90-year-old great-grandfather.



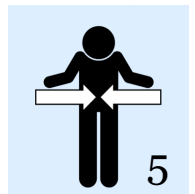
Hugs make Jeff feel good. Should he hug these people?

Jeff's hugs feel different to other people now that he is so big and strong. How do the hugs feel to a very old man? How do they feel to a 3-year-old?



How does hugging and touching change for people as they get bigger and older?

Have you ever felt confused about when and when not to hug someone? How has hugging changed for you as you have grown older?



Every summer, ever since he was little, Brian has looked forward to playing in the sandy area at the park. At age 13, Brian is as big as many adults, but he loves playing in the sand more than ever.



Brian grabs his sand bucket. He starts to walk towards the sandy area, where two 7-year-olds are already playing.



What do you think Brian should do? He still likes playing in the sand.

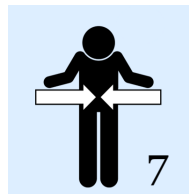
If he plays in the sand right next to the 7-year-olds, what will the little kids think? What will the parents of the 7-year-olds think?



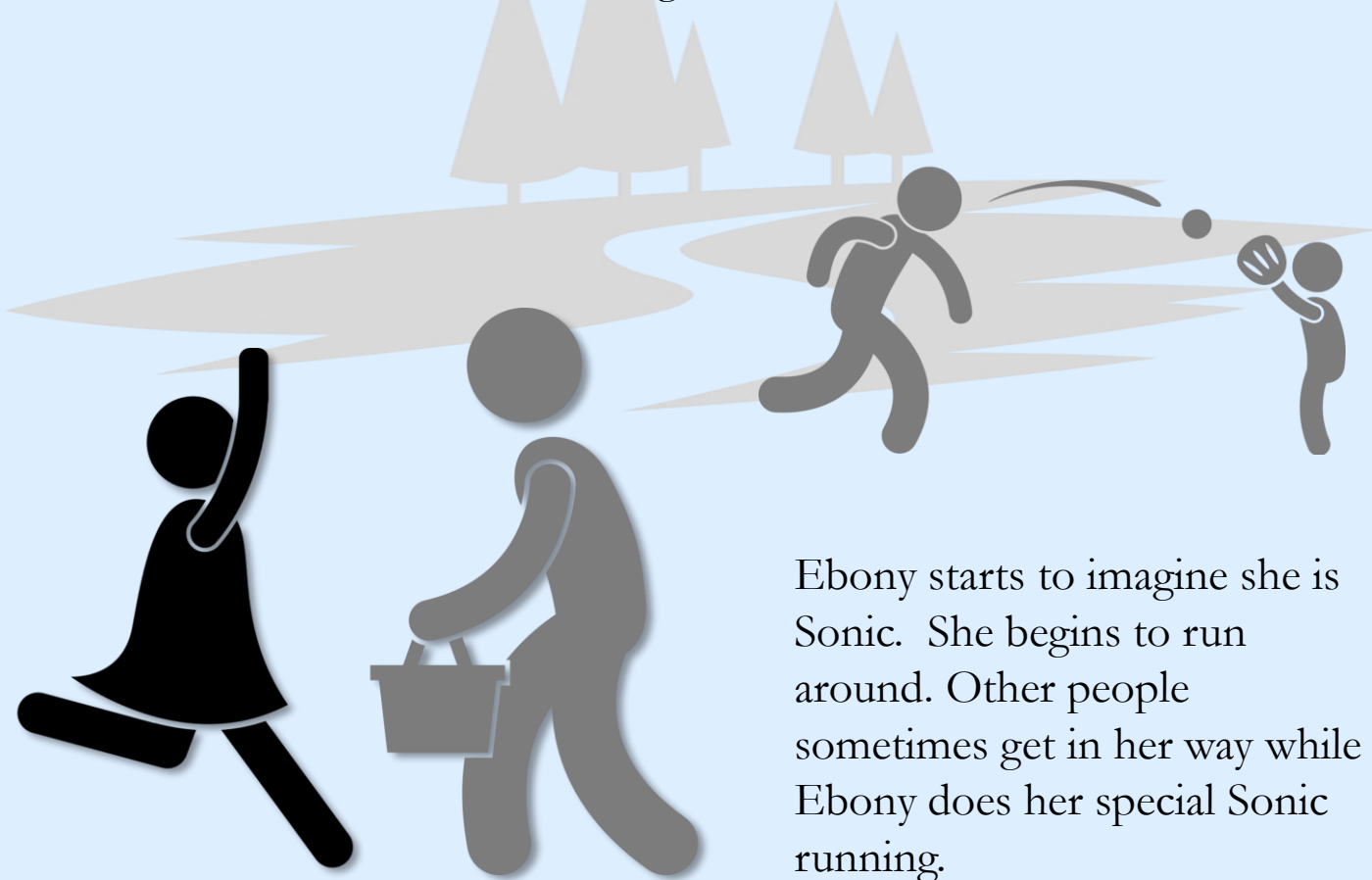
Lots of people continue to like “little kid” activities even when they are teenagers.

If you are a teenager, what are some younger kid interests that you have kept as you got older?

Have you ever had a situation where you accidentally got too close to a younger kid and other people felt uncomfortable?



At the church picnic on Saturday, Ebony starts to think a lot about the Sonic the Hedgehog game. Usually, Ebony gets to stay inside playing Sonic on Saturdays, but today her parents made her come to this picnic. Even though she is not at home now, she is thinking a lot about Sonic.

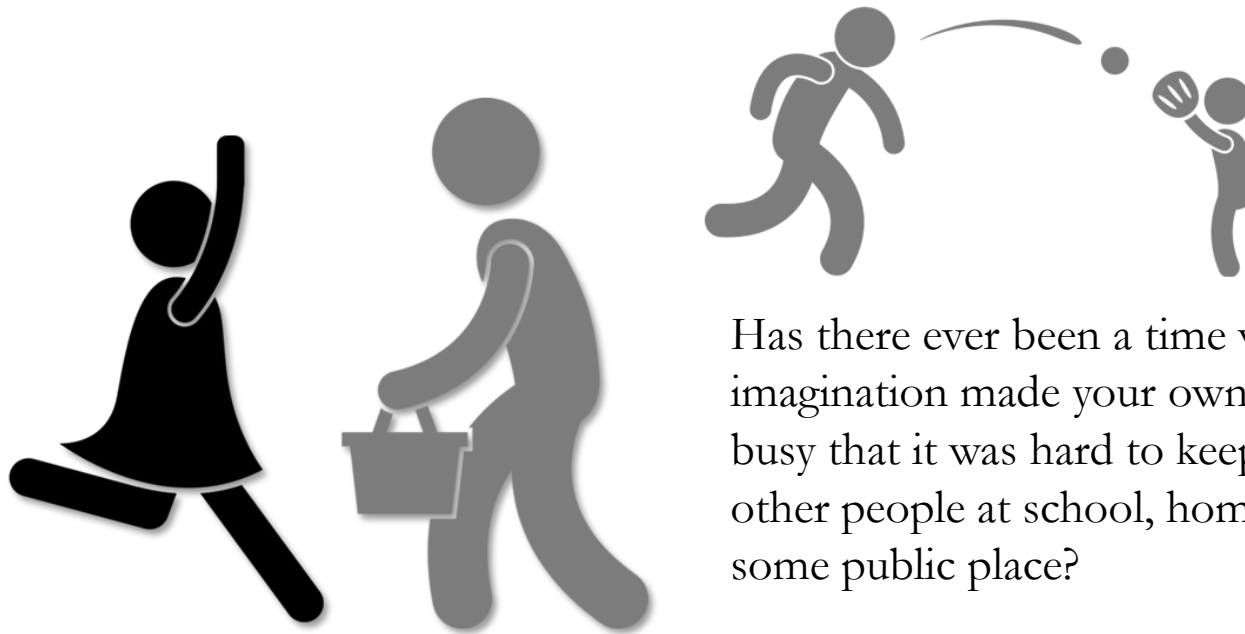


Ebony starts to imagine she is Sonic. She begins to run around. Other people sometimes get in her way while Ebony does her special Sonic running.

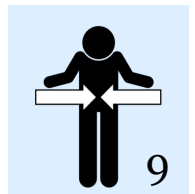
Ebony likes to think about Sonic and run around at the church picnic. Should other people get out of her way? Should Ebony do anything differently?

Lots of people think about their favorite things and pretend things even when other people are around.

What might other people think when Ebony gets up too close to them while she is running like Sonic?

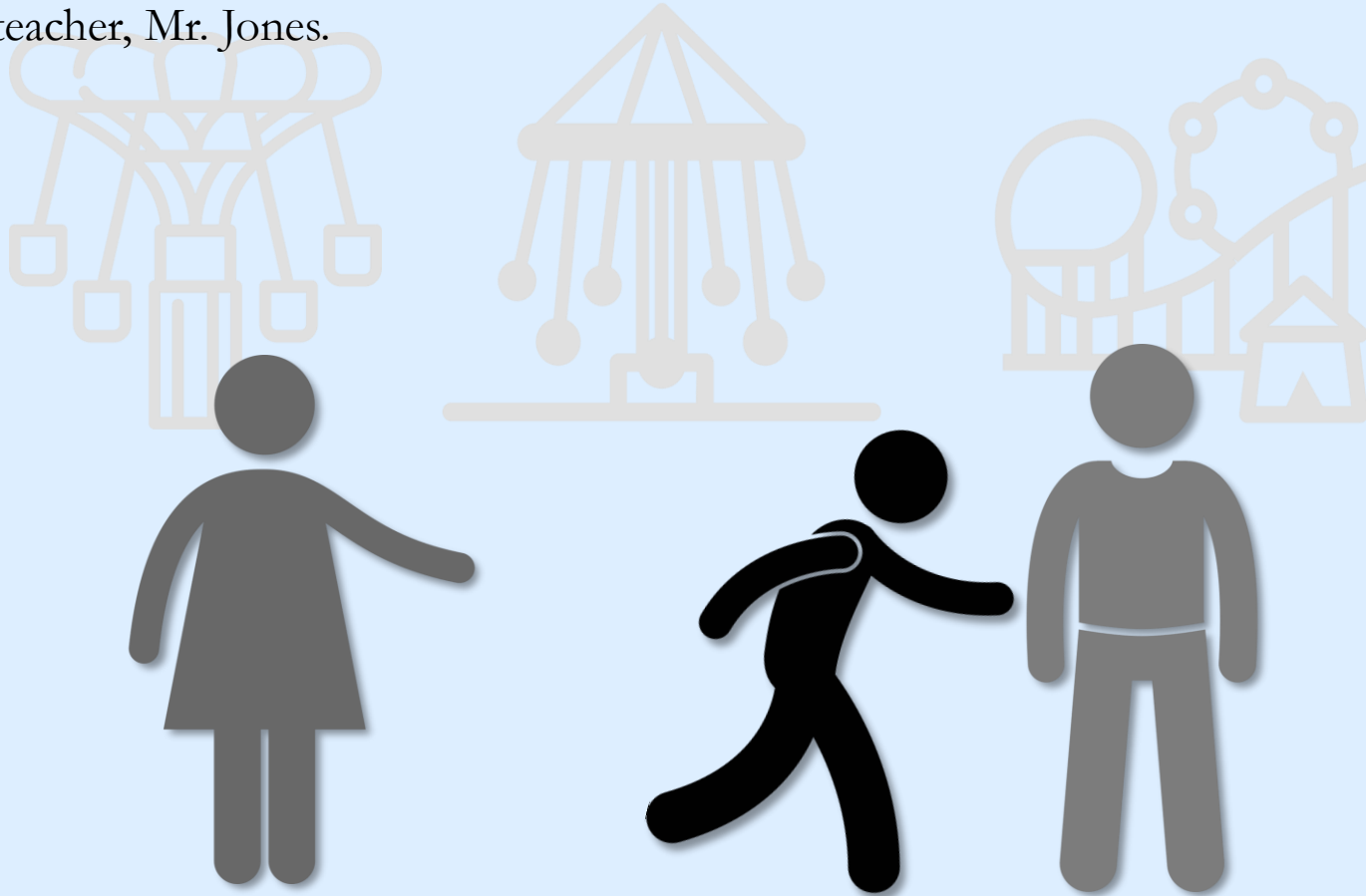


Has there ever been a time when your imagination made your own brain so busy that it was hard to keep track of other people at school, home or some public place?

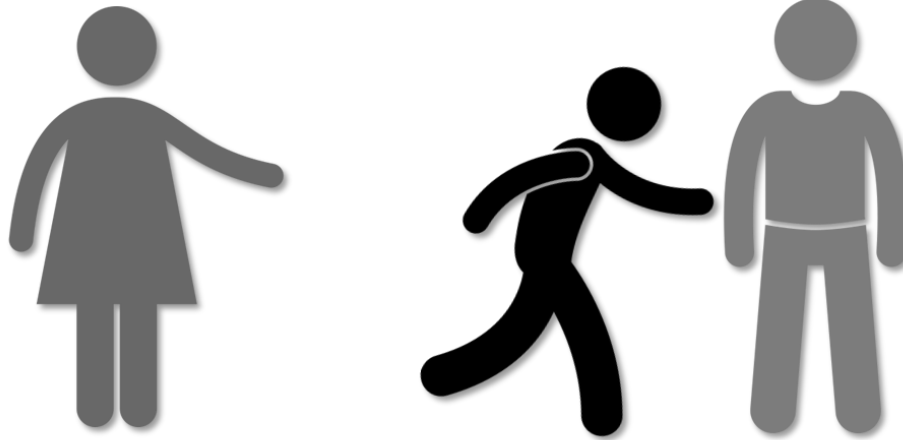


Hanna, age 12, is used to holding her dad's hand when they go out together.

During the school trip to the amusement park, Hanna holds the hand of her teacher Ms. Campbell for a while. Later, she reaches for the hand of her other teacher, Mr. Jones.



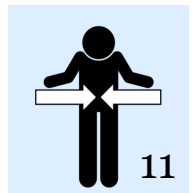
It can be very complicated figuring out when you can get close to someone and touch them, and when you cannot. A lot of times, something that is okay in one place might not be okay in another situation.



What do you think?

Is it okay for Hanna to hold Ms. Campbell's hand? Is it okay to hold Mr. Jones's hand?

What are some examples of closeness or touching that you do with members of your own family that you would *not* do with people outside your family?



Michael hates public restrooms, but there are times when he has to use them.



Michael sees a row of five urinals, with the one on the far right being used.

Which urinal should Michael pick?



Restrooms at school or other public places are very tricky places to figure out.

There are all kinds of “unwritten rules” about what to say and not say in a restroom. There are other rules about how far or close to be to other people in the restroom.

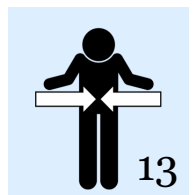


What do you think?

Which urinal should Michael pick?

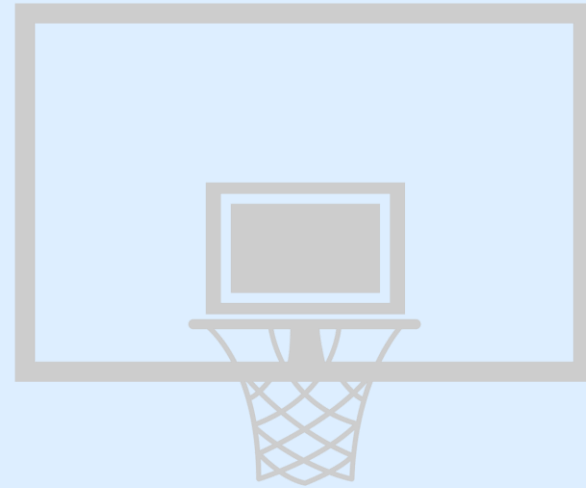
Why?

What is an example of something you have learned about restroom behavior that you did not know when you were younger?



Mark, age 13, learned in gym class how to get in real close to someone and steal the ball when you are playing basketball.

While playing basketball with Tina, Mark reaches in and grabs the basketball from her. While doing so, he accidentally bumps his hand up against Tina's chest.



Allison yells at him, calls him a mean name and runs to tell the gym teacher.



This must be very confusing for Mark. He was just trying to do what the gym teacher had taught him. But then he got in trouble.

Why did Tina get upset with Mark?

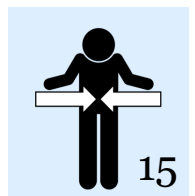
How do you think Tina feels?

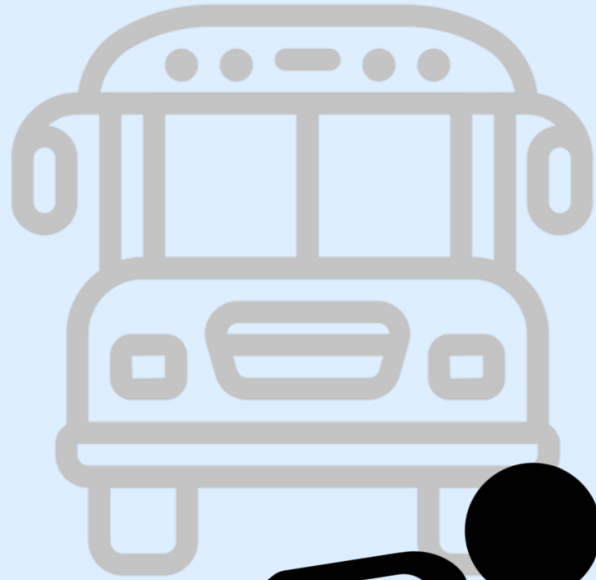


When boys and girls are together, what are some examples of play activities that are different for little kids as opposed to teenagers?

If you were the gym teacher, what advice would you give to Mark?

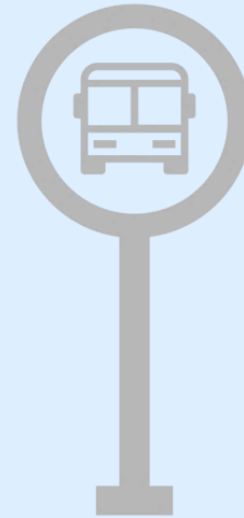
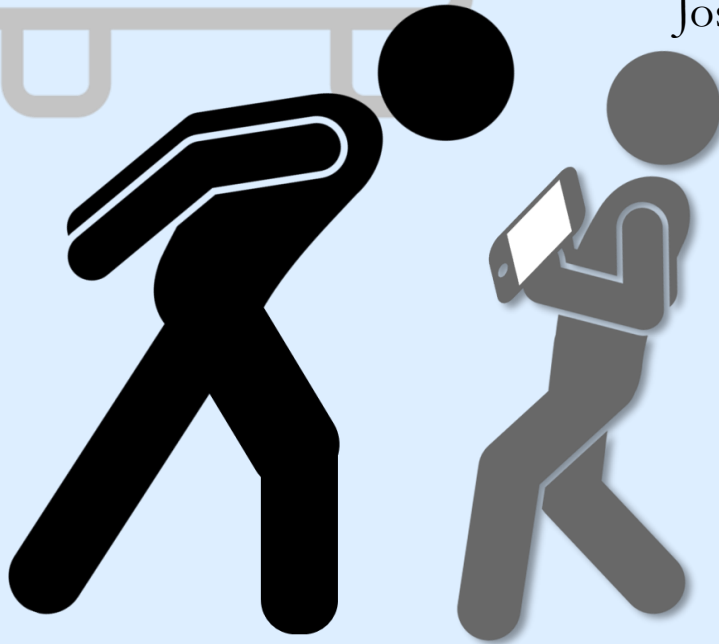
Have you ever made a mistake like Mark?





Josh, age 15, loves Mario games and videos a lot. At the school bus stop, a 10-year-old girl named Mary is watching a Mario video on YouTube on her phone. This is very exciting for Josh! Josh needs to get in very close to the young girl in order to see the video properly.

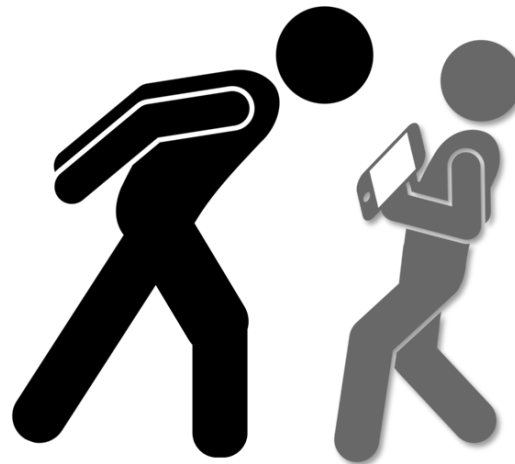
Josh gets called to the principal's office later, but he can't figure out why.



What was the mistake that got Josh in trouble?

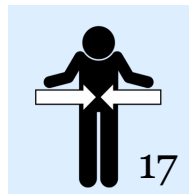
How did that happen?

How do you think Mary feels?



If you were the principal of the school, what would be a nice way you could help Josh to understand the mistake he made?

Sometimes people accidentally do things that bother or frighten other people. Did you ever bother someone by getting too close to them to see something?



Austin has recently sold a rare Yu-gi-oh card on eBay for 200 dollars! He tells lots of people at school on Monday, but there are others who have not yet gotten the amazing news.

Austin notices that some girls are walking away from him. These girls have not yet heard about the Yu-gi-oh card. Austin follows them down the hallway in order to show them the photo of the card on his phone!



When something exciting happens, it is normal to want to tell other people about it.

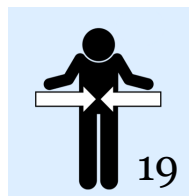
How excited is Austin about being able to get so much money for selling a Yu-gi-oh card?



Why are the girls moving away from Austin? How will they feel when he walks up close to them to show them the photo of the card?

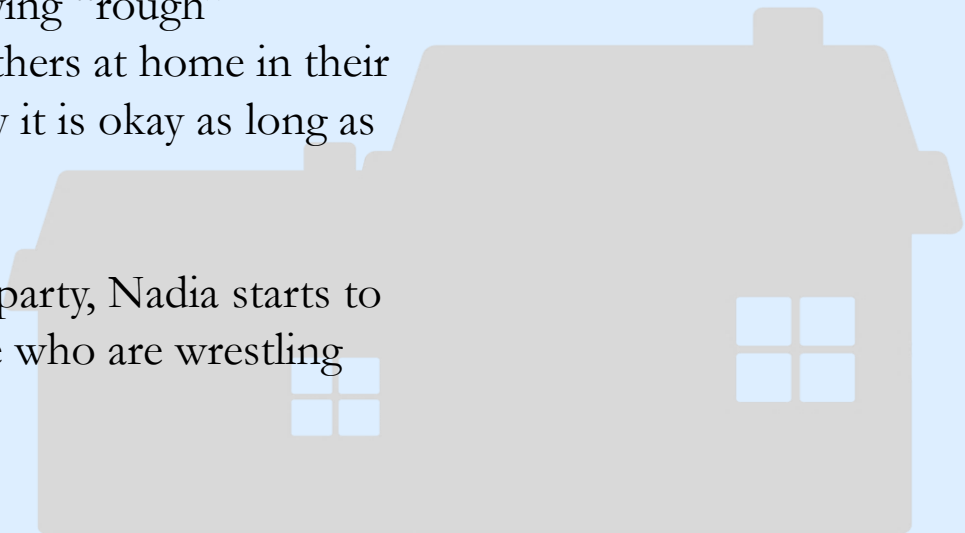
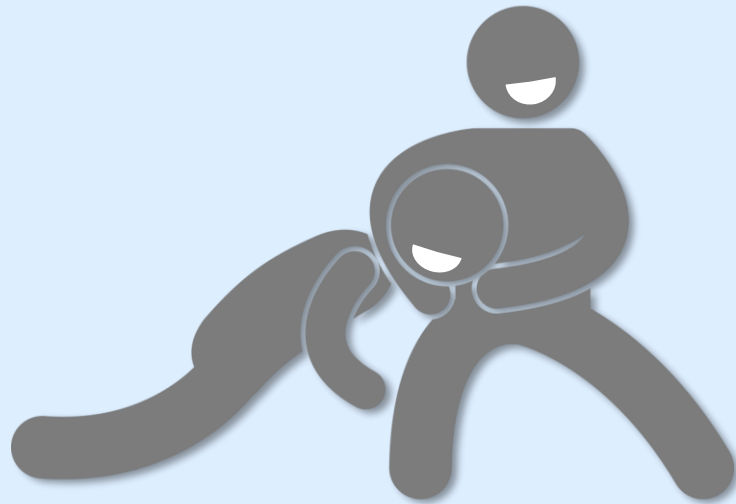
Have you ever gotten confused about personal space when you were really excited about something?

Have you ever been fascinated by something that other people were not very interested in?

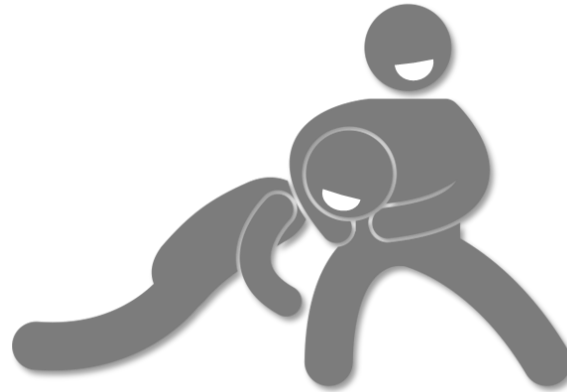


Nadia, age 13, is used to playing “rough” sometimes with her two brothers at home in their backyard. Nadia’s parents say it is okay as long as no one gets hurt.

At a neighborhood outdoor party, Nadia starts to join in with two boys her age who are wrestling for fun.



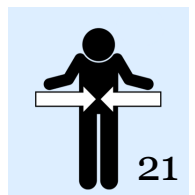
Lots of girls and women enjoy playing “rough.” They do it in sports and they do it for fun. Nadia likes playing “rough” and she does it at home with her brothers.



In what ways is this kind of playing different for Nadia with these boys compared to doing the same thing with her own brothers?

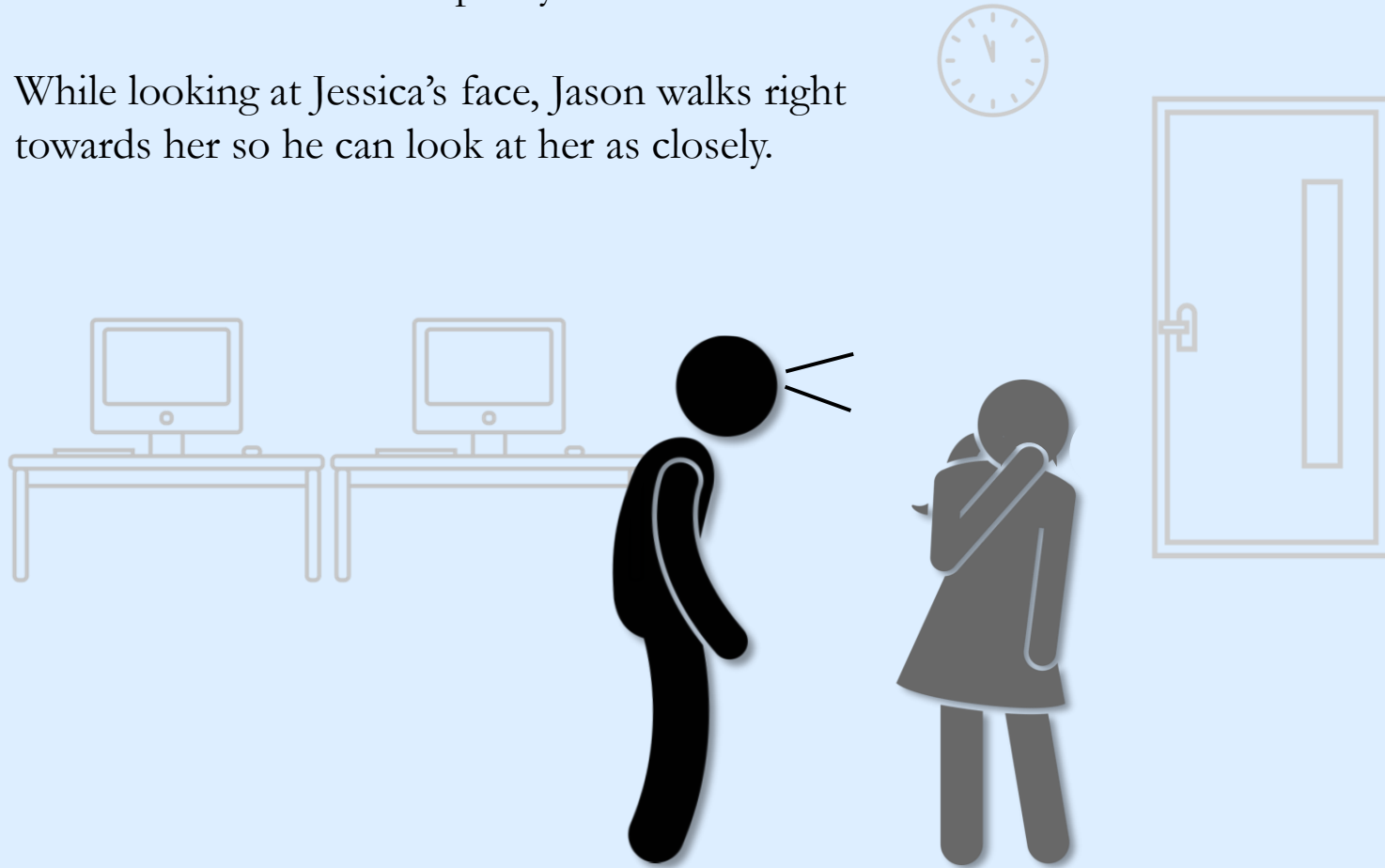
If you were Nadia’s friend, how might you explain this to her?

What are some sports and play activities where boys and girls might accidentally touch each other in a way that makes someone feel uncomfortable? In what ways does playing rough change when kids become teenagers?



When Jason likes something, he likes to look at it up close. In his computer class at school, he likes to look at Jessica from just a few feet away because she is smart and pretty.

While looking at Jessica's face, Jason walks right towards her so he can look at her as closely.

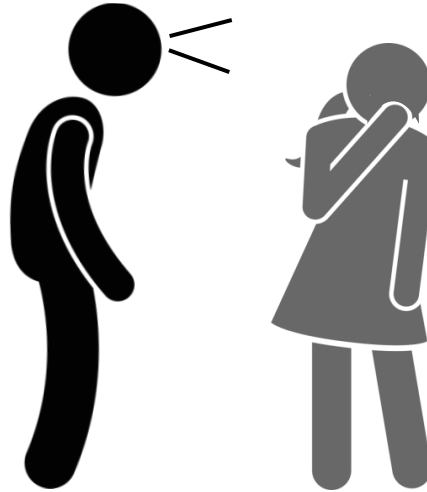




Jason likes Jessica. Looking at Jessica makes him feel good.

We can't be sure what Jessica is thinking while Jason is looking at her.

What are some thoughts Jessica might be having right now?

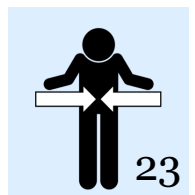


If you were Jason's friend, what kinds of advice might you have for Jason about his getting so close to Jessica and staring at her?

It's only natural to want to be close to someone that you like. It's hard to know when to be close and when to stay at a distance.

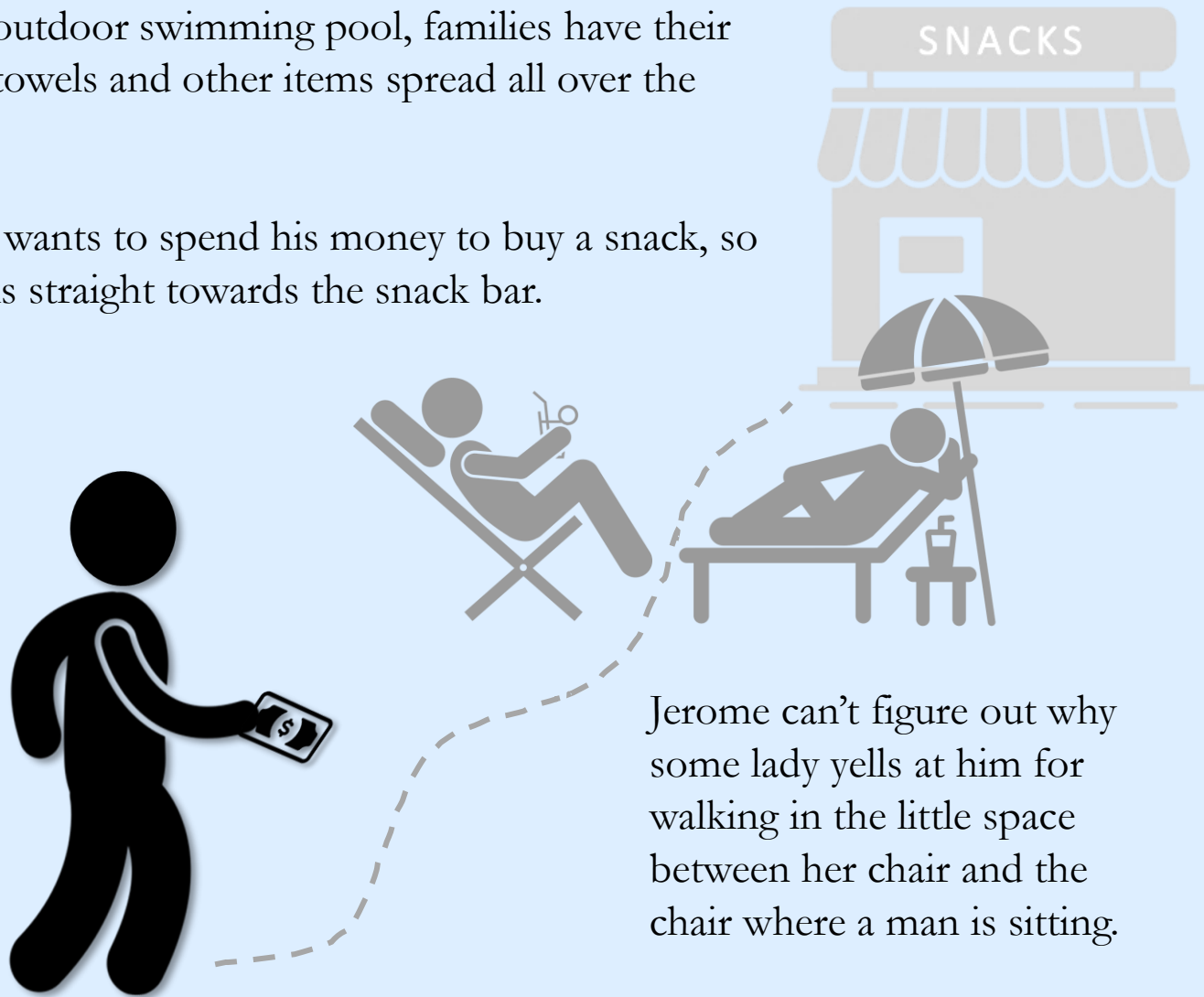
If you were Jessica's friend, what kind of advice might you have for her in this situation?

Have you ever had a problem like Jason, or like Jessica?



At the outdoor swimming pool, families have their chairs, towels and other items spread all over the place.

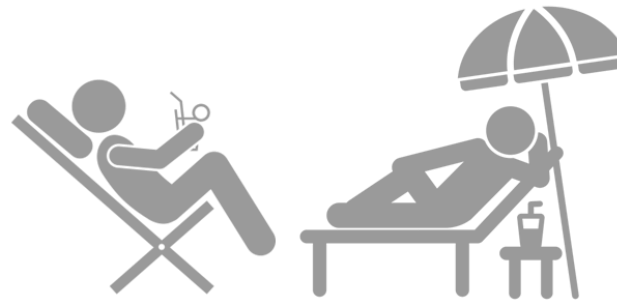
Jerome wants to spend his money to buy a snack, so he walks straight towards the snack bar.



Jerome can't figure out why some lady yells at him for walking in the little space between her chair and the chair where a man is sitting.

In some places, like a school classroom, the space is organized in a way that is orderly and easy to understand.

Other places are harder to figure out. At outdoor swimming pools, for example, people and chairs and towels are scattered all around.

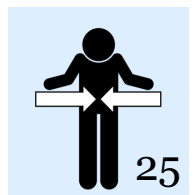


What was Jerome's mistake?



Can you think of a time when you made a mistake like Jerome?

Can you think of an example of a situation where it was hard for you to figure out where to move around without getting too close to people?



Patrick loves his relatives, especially his grandmother. But Patrick has always had problems with being hugged by Grandma, or his parents, or anybody. He knows that people want to hug him sometimes, but hugging makes him feel uncomfortable and that's just the way he is.

When Grandma comes to visit, Patrick really hates it when Grandma gives him big hugs. Patrick's dad has asked Grandma to please stop giving Patrick hugs, but she keeps doing it.



Patrick does not like being hugged by his grandmother.

Is he wrong for disliking hugs?

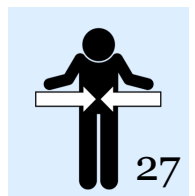
Adults can make their own personal space mistakes sometimes.

The grandmother needs to learn better ways to love Patrick other than hugging him.

If you were the mom or dad, how might you explain this to the grandmother?



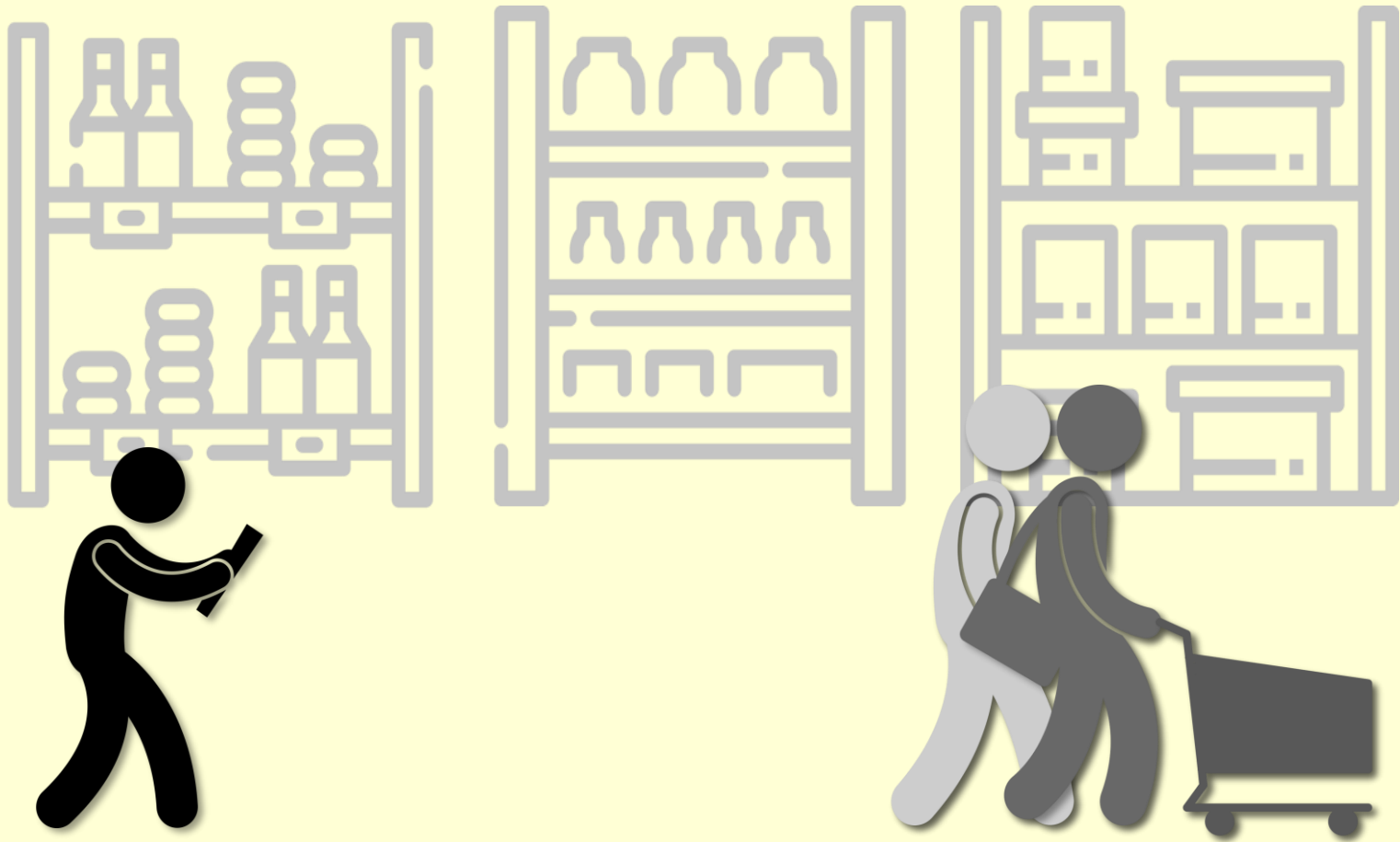
Is there some kind of family hugging or touching that you have gotten more used to? Is there some kind of family hugging or touching that you avoid because you don't like it?



# Part two: Too far



John is with his dad and uncle at the grocery. They have asked John to walk *with* them instead of *way behind*. But John says it's too hard to walk right next to them because he needs to keep playing a game on his tablet.



For John, it is hard for him to pay attention to two things at once. He can either play his game, or else keep track of his father and uncle – but he cannot do both.

For John, the game seems much more important.



What do you think? Is it okay for John to be playing a game on his tablet while he is walking with family at the grocery?

How does this make his dad and uncle feel?

What about you? Is it hard sometimes to walk right next to people?

Do you end up too far away from the people you are walking with? How does that happen?

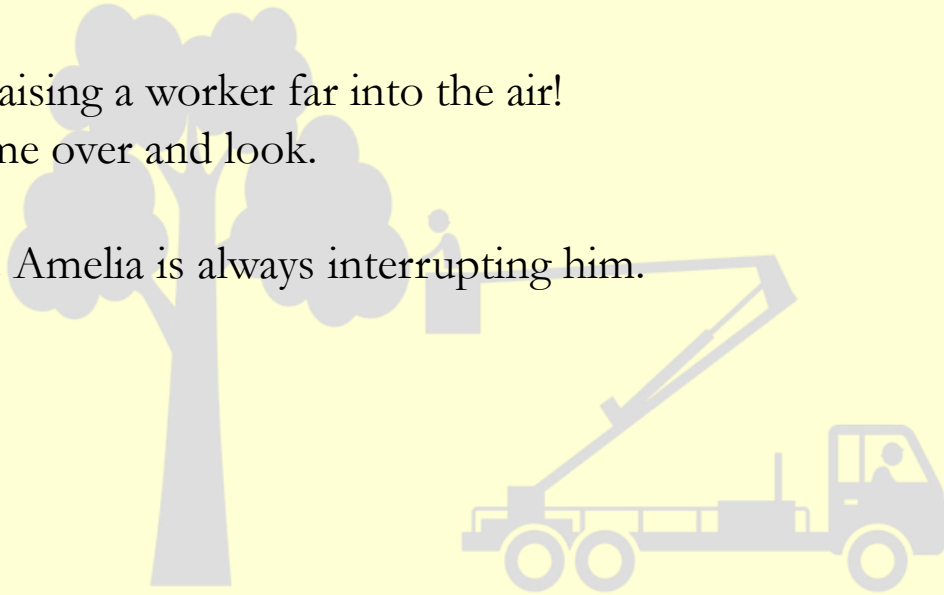




Tom and Amelia are hanging out together at the park. Tom is watching his favorite video on his phone.

Amelia sees a utility truck raising a worker far into the air!  
She calls out to Tom to come over and look.

Tom feels annoyed because Amelia is always interrupting him.

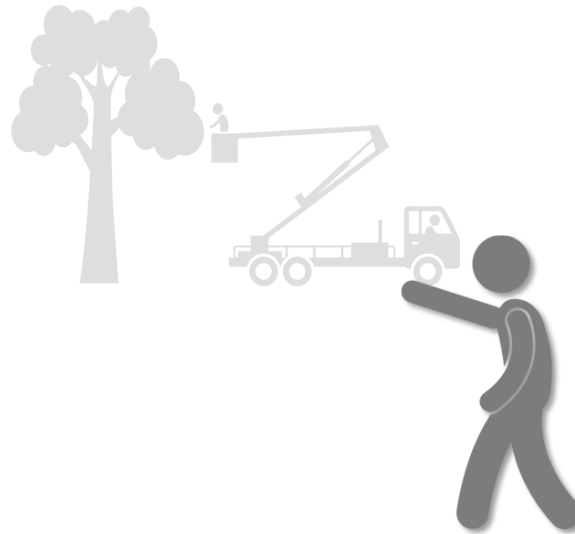


Tom wants to keep watching the video on his phone. Some distance away, Amelia sees something interesting and she wants Tom to come watch with her.

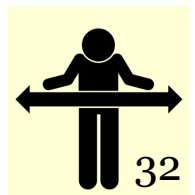
What do you think Tom should do?



When people go somewhere together, they are usually supposed to do many things together and see many things together. People need to be careful to not get stuck on their phones or game systems.

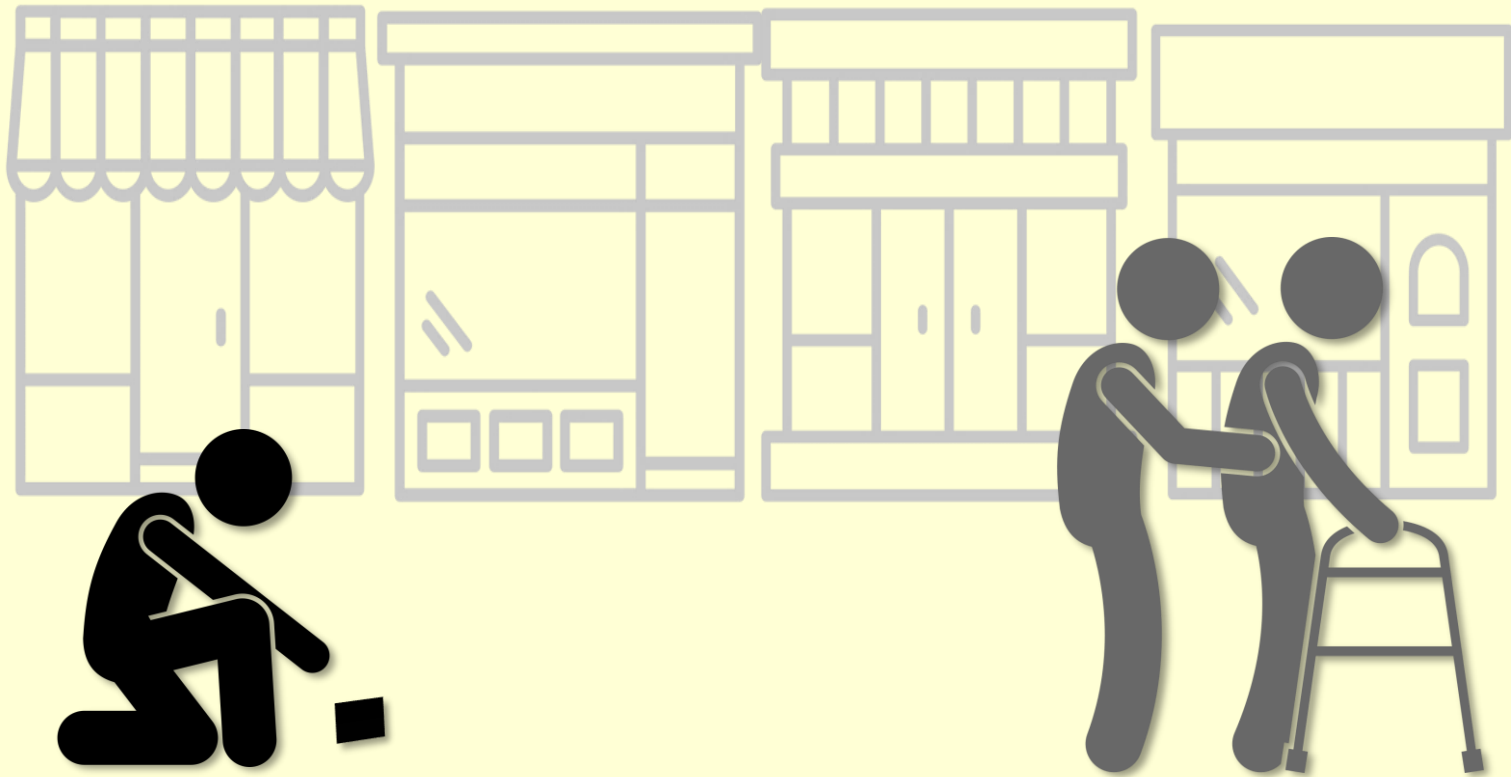


Have you ever had a problem with using your phone, tablet or game system too much when you were around family or friends? Does it ever make you lose track of people or get too far away from them?



While at the mall, Tatiana notices something unusual on the floor - a Pokémon card that is torn nearly in half.

She calls out to her mother and grandmother to come over and see it, but they are not answering her.



When people are out together, each person might be thinking about different things.

What is Tatiana thinking about? What do you think the mother and grandmother are mainly thinking about?



Have you ever had a problem with getting too far away from family or friends when you are out somewhere with them?



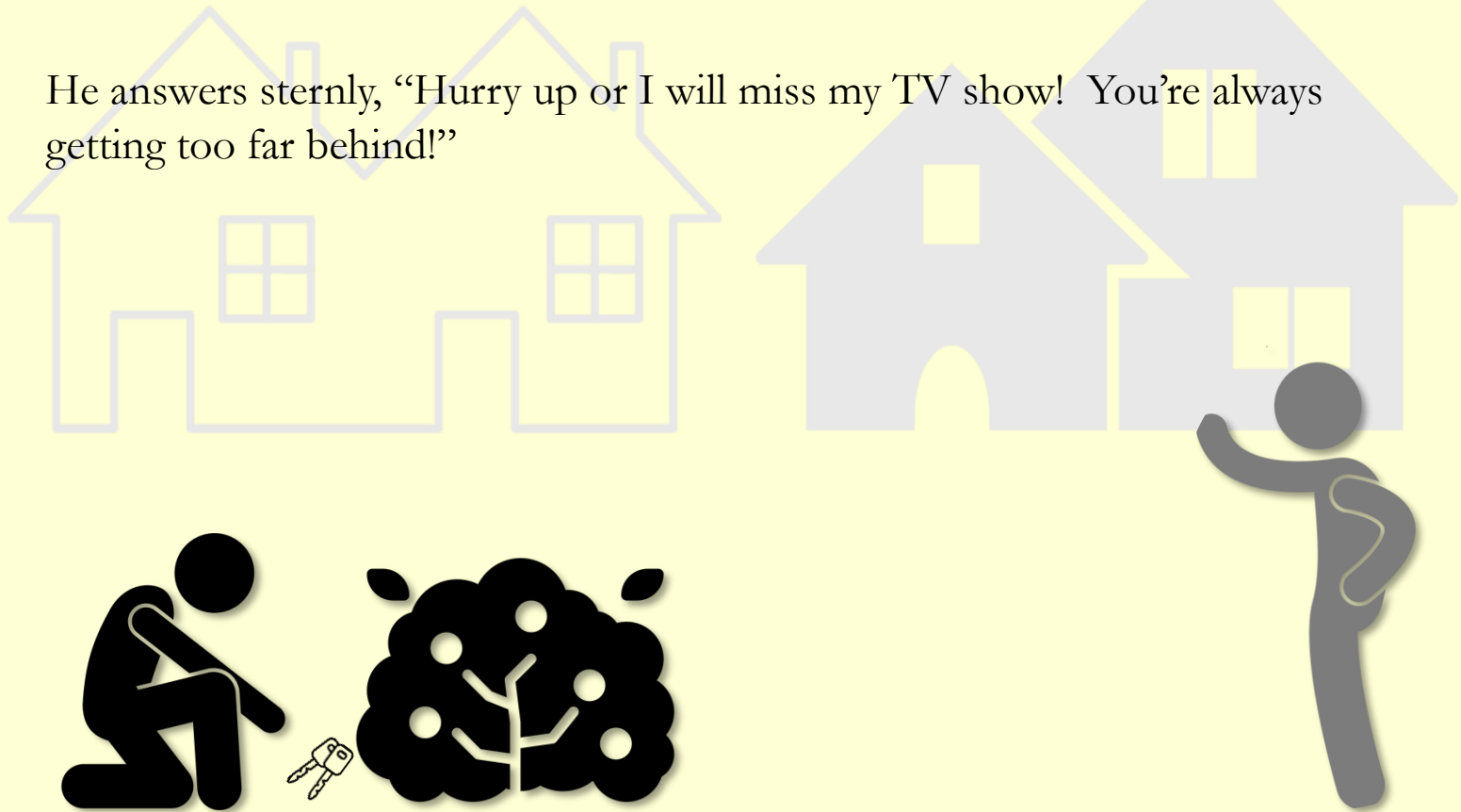
What ideas do you have on how to fix a problem like that?



Madelyn and her grandfather are walking in their neighborhood. Madelyn often looks down while walking. She notices some things others miss.

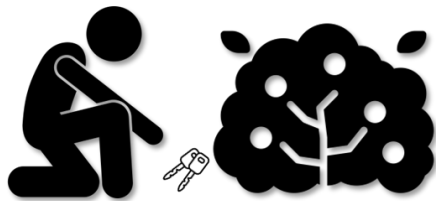
She sees some car keys in a bush. Madelyn calls out to her grandfather to come and look.

He answers sternly, “Hurry up or I will miss my TV show! You’re always getting too far behind!”



Sometimes it is important to make someone stop what they are doing to look at something. Other times, it is not important.

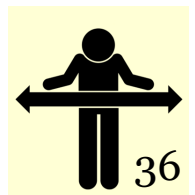
What do you think? Is it okay or not okay for Madelyn to make her grandpa come look at the keys, even though he might be late to watch his show?



In this situation, what is Madelyn thinking and feeling?

What is Madelyn's grandpa thinking and feeling?

Are you a person who sometimes notices things that other people might not notice? Can you think of an example of when this happened in your own life?



Alan and lots of his relatives are walking towards the entrance of the movie theater. The movie is about to start.

Alan is sure that they won't all find seats together unless they hurry, so Alan runs ahead.



What is Alan mainly thinking about?

What might Alan's relatives be thinking as they see Alan running ahead of them towards the movie theater?



Alan feels it is very important to buy the theater tickets as soon as possible.

When you are out with other people, do you ever feel annoyed when they don't keep up with you?

For the relatives who are behind Alan, what do you think is *even more* important than getting the tickets quickly?

How do they feel when you go ahead of them?





Ethan likes to walk at a certain speed that feels normal for him. Almost always, he walks at that same “just right” speed, no matter what.

Some people, like Ethan’s uncle, walk too slow for Ethan. Others, like his friends Peter and Max, walk too fast. Everyone keeps saying, “C’mon, walk *with* me by my side!” Ethan is annoyed. He keeps walking the way he likes.



Ethan likes to walk at one speed most of the time. When he walks with other people, they get annoyed because he is either too slow or too fast for them.



What do you think Ethan should do?

What about you?

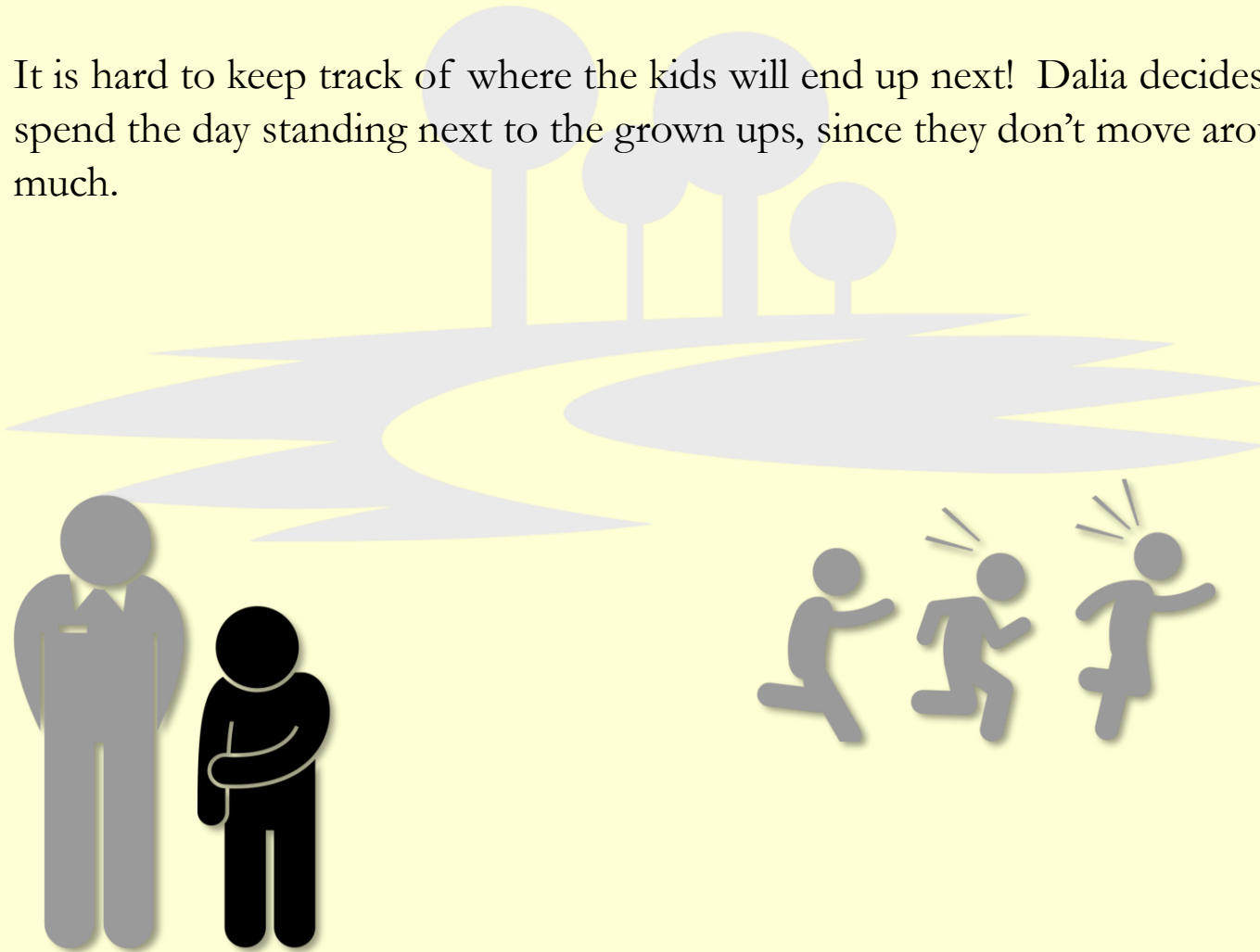
If you were Ethan's friend, what advice could you give him about walking with people?

Do other people complain that you get behind and ahead of them instead of walking by their side?



At the summer day camp program, Dalia notices other children moving around here and there in groups, sometimes walking, sometimes running.

It is hard to keep track of where the kids will end up next! Dalia decides to spend the day standing next to the grown ups, since they don't move around so much.

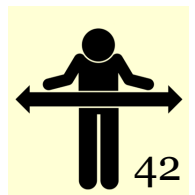


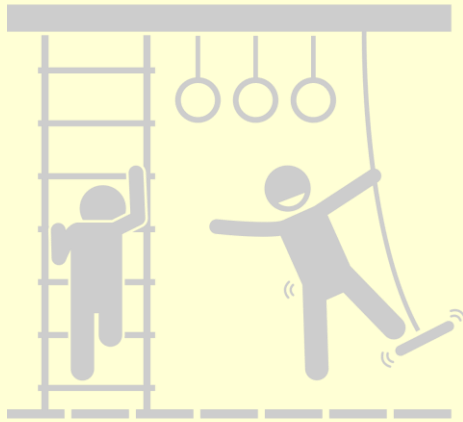
When children play together without an adult telling them what to do, they often change what they are doing from one minute to the next. This is upsetting to Dalia. She likes to know what is going to happen and she doesn't like being surprised when kids keep randomly switching their activities.

If you were Dalia's friend in this summer day camp program, what kind of advice would you give to her?

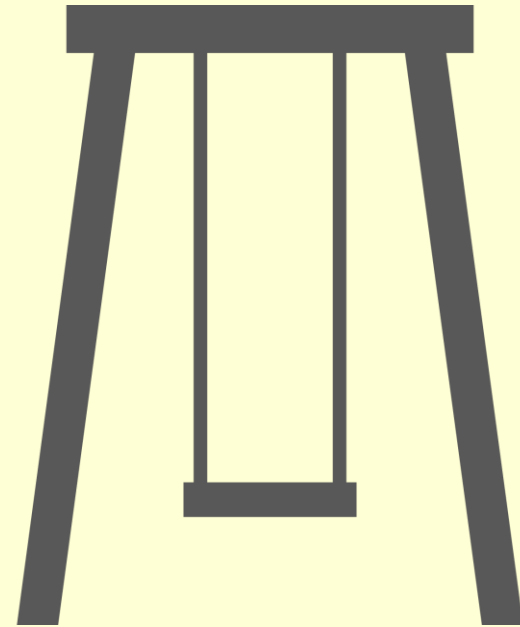
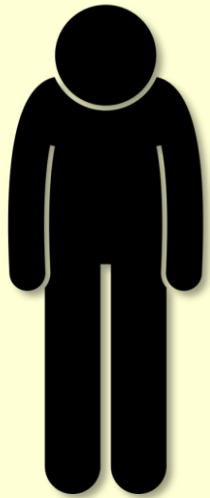


Have you ever been in a situation like this, where you ended up hanging out with the grownups instead of playing with other children?

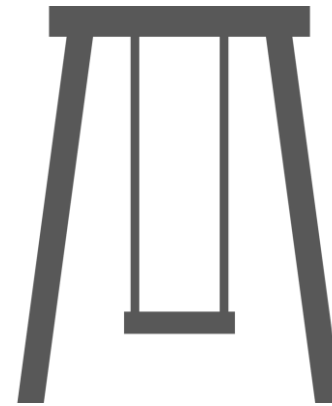
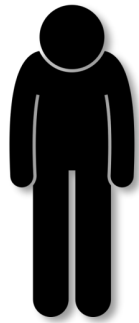




Elton often feels tense during the school day, sitting in a crowded room with so many children. During recess, he usually wants to sit alone on the swings for a while. Elton's friend Tim tells Elton, "It's no fun being your friend when you want to be alone at recess every day!" Elton can't figure out what to do: relax alone or play with Tim.



Elton has a difficult decision to make. He can make his friend Tim feel better by playing with him. Or Elton can sit by himself on the swings for a while and try to get more relaxed before recess is over and he needs to go back to class.



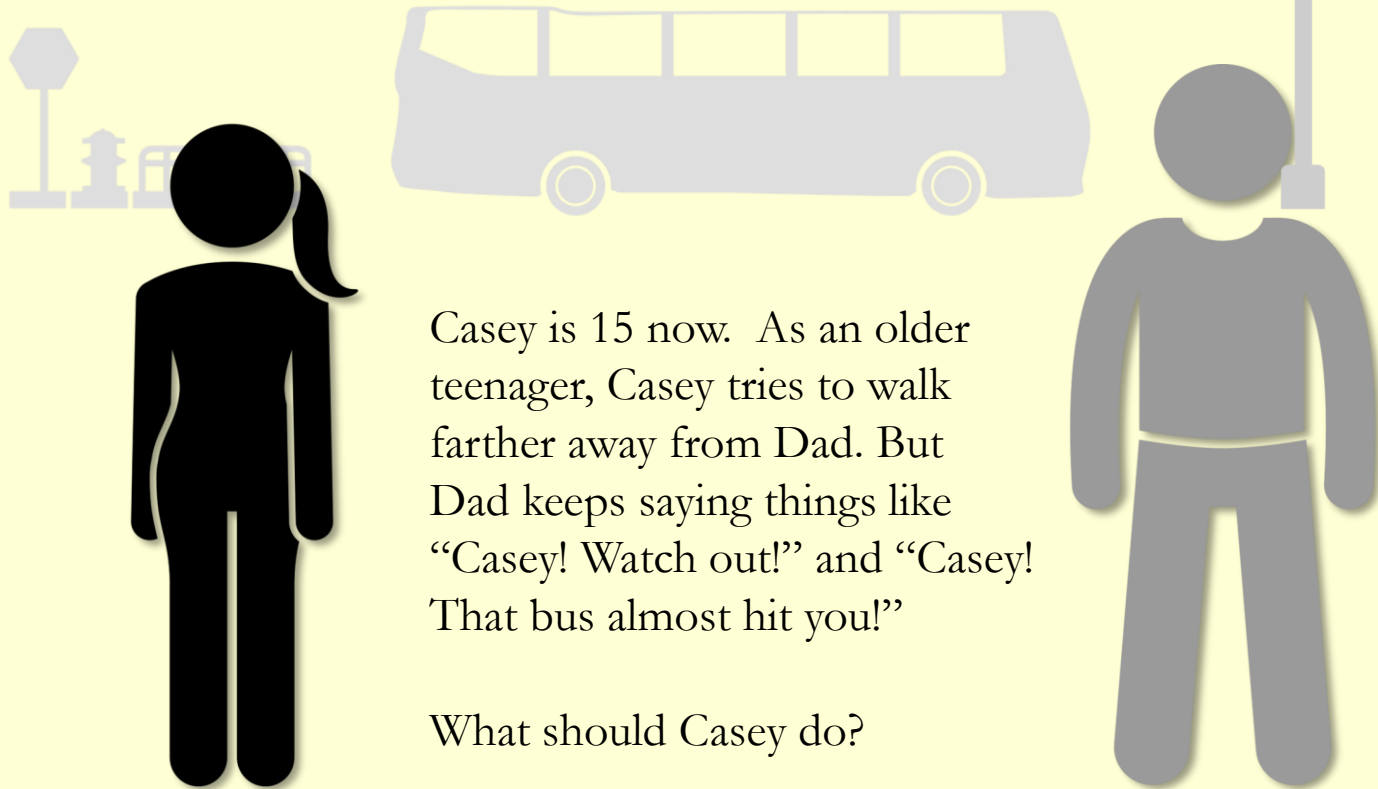
What do you think Elton should do?  
Sometimes, being by yourself is relaxing.

What do you think Elton could say to his friend Tim?

Have you ever had to make a choice between spending some relaxing time alone and hanging out with other people?



When Casey was younger, Dad always kept Casey very close to him when they walked together in the city. That way, Casey would not bump into people or get hit by a car.

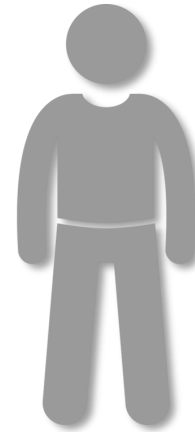
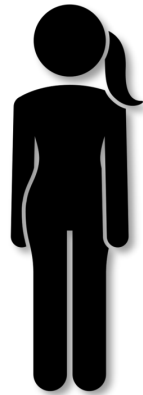


Casey is 15 now. As an older teenager, Casey tries to walk farther away from Dad. But Dad keeps saying things like “Casey! Watch out!” and “Casey! That bus almost hit you!”

What should Casey do?

Casey is just three years from being an adult. She wants to walk around in public without a grownup at her side.

Casey wants to be like other teenagers she has seen.

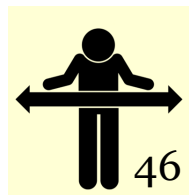


What are some things that the father is worried about? What can Casey do to help her father worry less?

If you were the father, what would you say to Casey?

When you are with your own parents outside the home, how do you decide how close or far away to be from your parents?

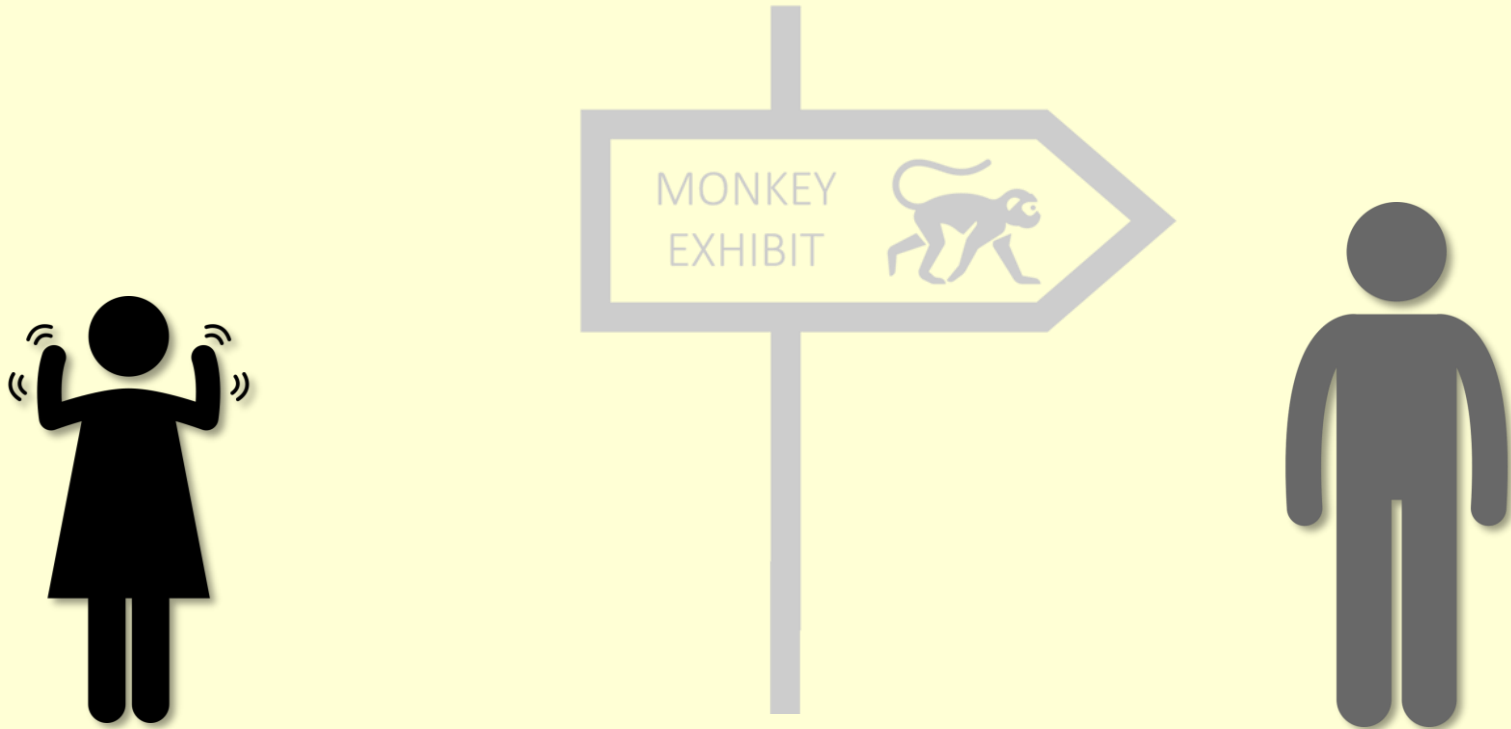
Have you ever argued with them about it?





At the zoo's monkey exhibit with her uncle Bob, the monkeys are cool but they smell really bad. Maria, age 10, starts walking away from the monkeys, eventually stopping when she finds a place that smells better.

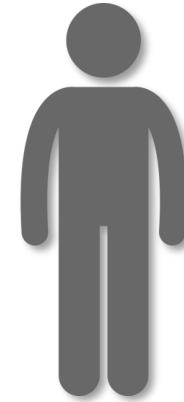
Meanwhile, Uncle Bob is watching the monkeys closely. When he looks up, Maria is gone! Fifteen minutes later, when Uncle Bob finally finds Maria, she says, "Uncle Bob! Don't **ever** get lost at the zoo again!"



Maria needs to get away from the bad smells in the monkey exhibit at the zoo, so she walks away from her uncle.



Which person “got lost?”  
Maria or Uncle Bob?



If you were Maria’s friend, what advice would you give to her about dealing with places in public that smell bad, or are too loud, too hot or too cold?

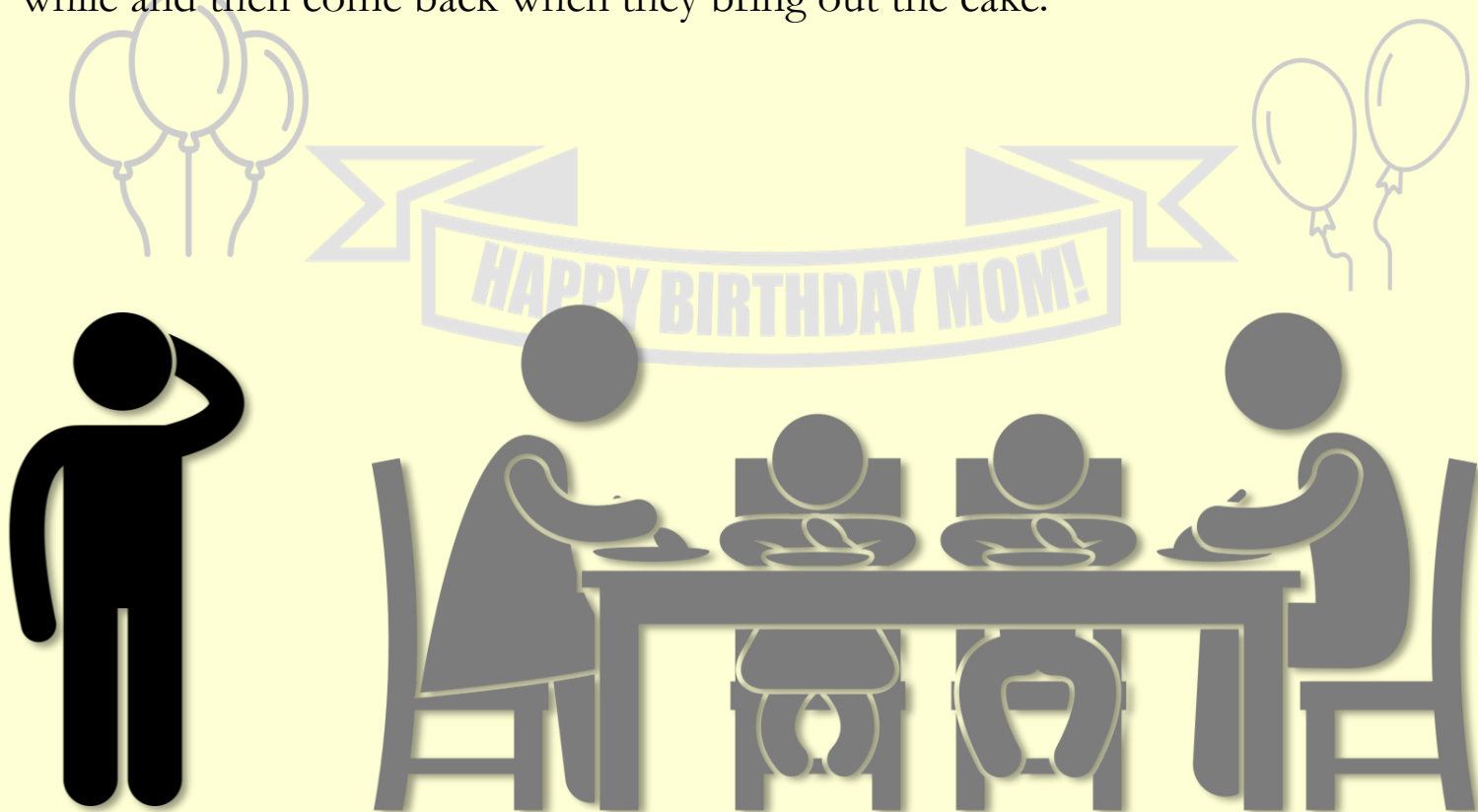
Have you ever gotten lost when you are somewhere with a parent or other grownup?

What did you learn from that experience?

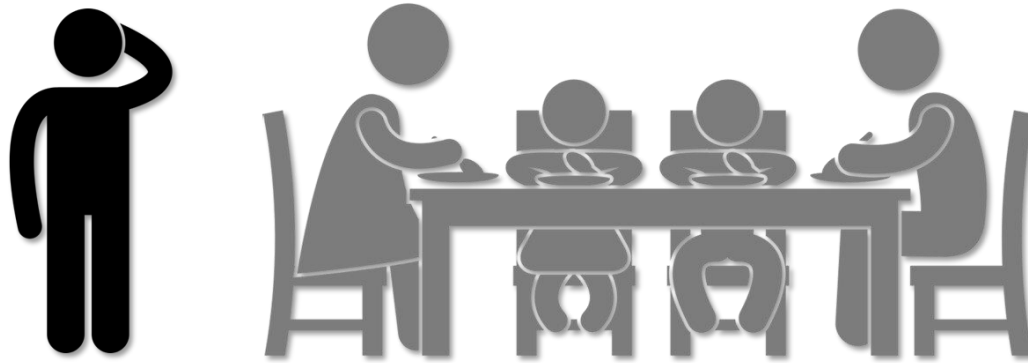


Anya loves her mother so much. Anya made a nice card to give her at Mom's birthday dinner. But the smell and the sound of people eating pea soup during the dinner is disgusting for Anya.

Anya wonders if she can ask Dad if she may go sit in the other room for a while and then come back when they bring out the cake.



Certain sights, sounds and smells can be very hard for some people to deal with. Over time, people often get over many of these “sensory” problems, but it can take a lot of work.



Anya finds it really hard to watch other people eat pea soup. But it is her mother’s birthday. What do you think she should do?

The solutions in these situations are not easy.

What about you?

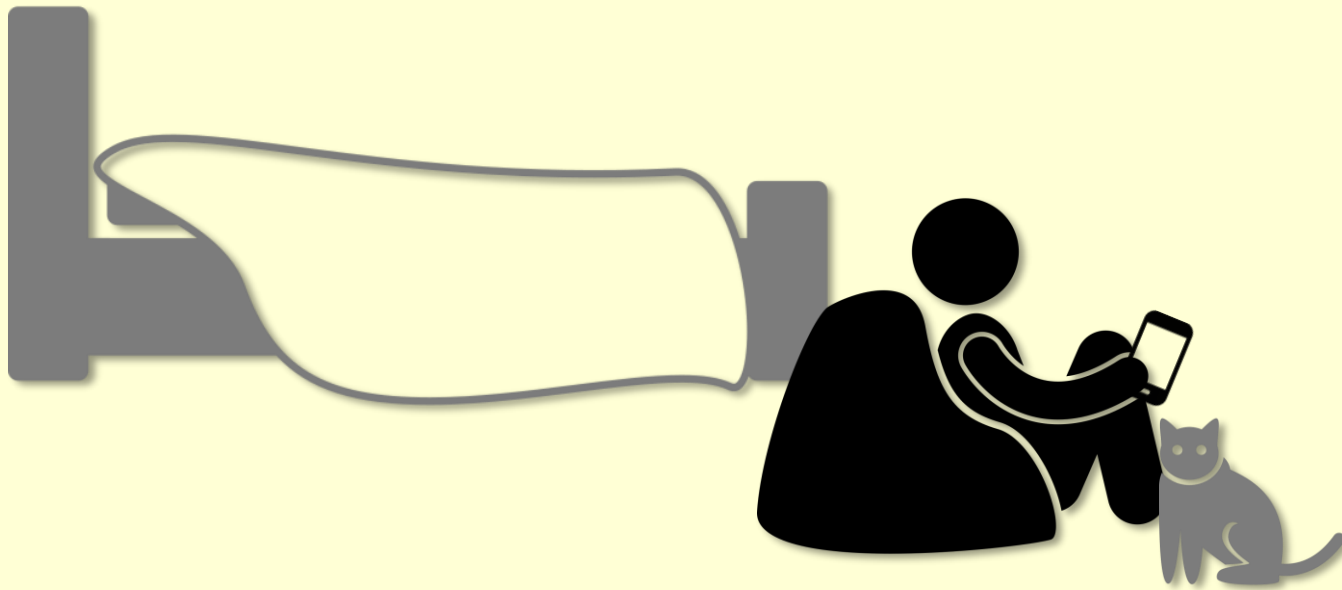
Do certain sights, sounds and smells make you want to get far away from the thing that is bothering you?



Over the past few years, Allison has gotten better at spending more time with people. But on some days when Allison has had to be with people a lot, she needs time – more than most people – all alone to rest and recover.

One Saturday after a hard week at school, Allison is enjoying some “alone” time at home. Then her friend Julia texts Allison and asks her to meet her at the bowling alley.

It’s hard for Allison to decide what to do.



Allison gets very tired and nervous sometimes. She has learned from her experience that there are times she needs to be by herself to feel better again.

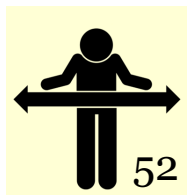


Allison's friend Julia wants Allison to go bowling now. What should Allison do?

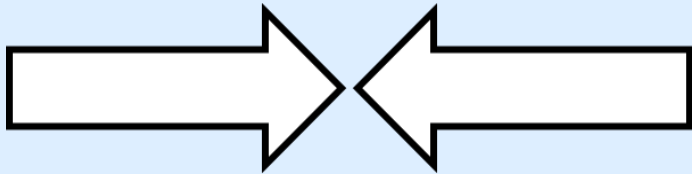
If you were Allison, what would you say in your text to Julia?

What about you? Over time, have you been getting better at hanging out with other people, like Allison?

Are there times when you need to be away from other people so you can rest and relax?

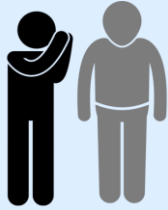


Part three:  
Learning how to not be  
too close or too far



# People often get much better at keeping the right personal space with other people.

Here are some examples.



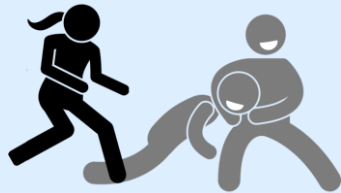
Jeff (page 4) has a habit of giving hugs to people who don't want them.

Jeff's teachers and parents start giving him advice on how a person his age should show affection. Jeff tries his best to follow their advice. Jeff finds other ways to show his love for people.



Jason (page 22) likes getting close to girls and staring at them.

Jason's therapist helps him become more aware of how this makes many girls feel. Jason learns to look at girls from farther away. Jason eventually finds girls who really do want to get close to him.



Nadia (page 20) wants to play "rough" with other children the same way she does with her brothers.

Nadia listens to the advice from her brothers and also one of her friends. She finds other ways to play that are not so "physical." She finds a wrestling team that includes girls.



Patrick's grandma (page 26) hugs Patrick, even though Patrick doesn't really like getting hugs from anybody.

Patrick's parents teach Patrick the right words to use to let people know he does not like hugs. Grandma follows people's advice and stops hugging Patrick.



# People often get much better at not getting too far away from other people.

Here are some examples.

John (page 29) gets too far away from his dad and uncle when he pays attention to his game instead of focusing on the people he is with.



John's dad makes John keep his game system in the car when they are out walking somewhere. John tries his best to not keep falling behind.



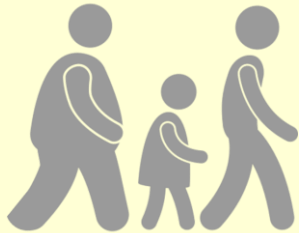
Casey (page 45) wants to be able to walk farther away from her father in public places.



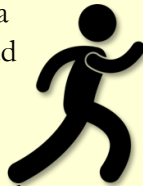
When she is away from home around strangers, vehicles and other dangers, Casey learns to pay closer attention to her surroundings and stay safe. Casey's Dad gradually gives Casey more freedom as she becomes more aware and more responsible.



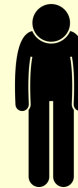
Alan (page 37) has a habit of going ahead of other people.



Alan practices walking next to people instead of going ahead of them. It's hard to do but he keeps trying and other people like it much better.

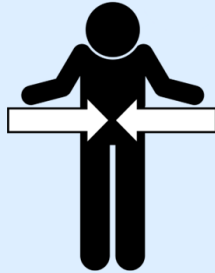


Elton's friend Tim is annoyed because Elton wants to relax and play alone at recess (page 43).



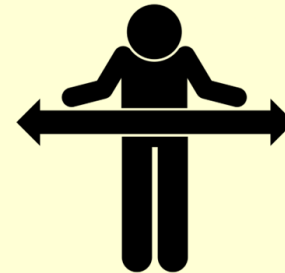
Tim can be a good friend by accepting that Elton needs time alone sometimes during recess. Elton can strengthen his friendship with Tim by finding other times when he and Elton can hang out and play.

## What about you?



What are some  
**personal space**  
problems you have  
worked on?

What are some  
personal space things  
you think you could get  
better at?



What are some  
**personal distance**  
problems you have  
worked on?

What are some  
personal distance things  
you think you could get  
better at?

# The End

