

Robotic Hugs: How a Hug Can Help Your Autistic Child

Autistic children and adults often seek pressure in a variety of ways to calm themselves and cope with sensory overload. Oftentimes, hugs and squeezes from other people can cause more distress because autistic children or adults are often unable to communicate their needs by indicating a particular amount or length of pressure. This is both frustrating and ineffective for both the autistic person and whoever is hugging or squeezing them.

The hug machine was created to help relieve this frustration, putting autistic individuals in control of their situation. Both children and adults who suffer from autism sometimes crave pressure to help calm anxiety. Because of this, one woman with autism developed the hug machine, also known as a hug box or a squeeze machine. The hug machine has two padded sideboards connected near the bottom of the boards to form a V-shape. A lever helps push the sideboards together to create pressure; the lever also allows the autistic child or adult the ability to control the amount and length of pressure.

Studies are still being conducted to find out why those with autism respond to pressure and how it can produce a calming effect. The hug machine may affect the heightened sensory perceptions of those with autism who often feels disruptive or distressing behavior. By applying pressure, perhaps the autistic child or adult moves his or her focus to a single feeling-the pressure-which in turn produces a calming effect. For many autistic children and adults, anxiety can be completely incapacitating. Not being able to function with the anxiety is frustrating, and so appropriate social behavior is even more difficult. Sometimes, the only release from such anxiety is through pressure. To this day, the hug machine is used by several programs and researchers studying autism as well as therapy programs.

Remember that hugging or squeezing an autistic child may not help him or her. You may, in fact, increase their senses and cause more anxiety. Though you may not be able to purchase a hug machine, you may be able to create a similar object. Try wrapping the autistic child or adult in a blanket, where they can control how much pressure to apply. You can also look into buying padded boards that more closely simulate the hug machine's side-boards and perhaps tie or tape some heavy-duty yarn to each side to allow the autistic child or adult control over how much pressure to apply and for how long. Contact your child's school to see if there has been any interest in purchasing a community hug-machine. This may not be a cure to all your child's problems, but it works well to help many autistic individuals cope with the world.