

OPINION

Packing heat

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Wendy Jacob

Imagine if, whenever a child with autism had a tantrum, his parents stripped off his clothes, wrapped him first in cold, wet towels, then in dry blankets, and forced him to stay in this painful cocoon for 45 minutes until his body warmed up.

It seems like a scene from one of those *Saw* movies. But this 'treatment,' called *le packing*, is real and well known in France. In fact, last February the French Public Health High Council deemed that *le packing is not risky* enough to warrant a ban.

It's not often that people in the autism field reach a consensus about anything. But this month, 18 of the field's heavyweights have declared that *le packing is unethical* and could prevent these children "from accessing their basic human rights to health and education."

In one of the few scientific abstracts in which *le packing* is described, researchers claim that it works by *diverting the child's attention* away from his or her obstructive behavior and to these new sensations. Psychiatrist **Pierre Delion**, one of the therapy's pioneers, claims that it also *reminds children of the limits of their body*.

There is no evidence for either of these claims and *le packing* is *unquestionably barbaric*. But one aspect of it — the sensation of being hugged — may bring comfort to some people with autism.

For example, many years ago **Temple Grandin**, the famous animal scientist and autism advocate, created a 'squeeze machine' — modeled after contraptions that calm cattle — to calm her frequent anxiety attacks. Temple lies facedown in the machine and uses a joystick to move two wooden panels in toward the sides of her body, pressing her evenly like a hug.

After meeting Grandin in 1995, **Wendy Jacob**, a researcher in the art, culture and technology department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, created a 'squeeze chair' (pictured above) or, as Jacob describes it, "a living room alternative to Grandin's machine."

The chairs have since been featured in a half-dozen art exhibitions across the world. It's charming and whimsical, the idea of sitting down for an embrace — and a far cry from being forcibly swaddled.