

Early Years Inclusion Team

Oral Sensory Seeking

Why does a child still put things in their mouth?

Oral sensory seeking, where a child continues to put things in their mouth after the age of two, is commonly reported alongside sensory issues, social communication difficulties, autism, developmental delays and learning disabilities.

They might continue to chew or suck on non-food objects. These children might suck or chew their sleeves or collar, or constantly have a toy or pencil in their mouth. In some cases, they may also eat non-food items.

Oral seeking is part of normal development

Oral sensory seeking behaviour, or mouthing items, is a normal behaviour in babies and infants. They use sucking to help to calm themselves and self soothe. This self-soothing can also be called self-regulation. It explains why dummies or pacifiers work so well to help calm down an upset baby. Sucking is also an important survival reflex, which is essential for feeding.

As they get older, infants then use their mouth to explore the world. It is very normal for children to put everything into their mouth between the ages of 18-24 months. This helps their sensory motor development. It helps them to learn more about an object, such as how big is it, how hard or soft is it, and its shape. The mouth acts like a second pair of eyes, giving the brain extra information about the objects in the world. This behaviour typically reduces from eighteen months, but it can continue until two years of age.

What might it look like if a child is oral sensory seeking?

For children that are over two years of age, you might continue to see these behaviours. Remember these behaviours are very normal in children under two years of age. However, past the age of two they would be less common.

- Putting toys into their mouth and sucking chewing them
- Chewing or sucking their collar or sleeves
- Putting their pencil in their mouth
- Chewing pieces of paper
- Sucking their thumb or biting nails



Common reasons a child might still be putting things in their mouths past the age of two

Just to emphasise again that it is really normal for children under the age of two to mouth items. The frequency can also increase when children are teething, again completely normal behaviour.

Here we will discuss some reasons that older children might continue with oral sensory seeking past this age.

1. The child has developmental delays

As noted above, children use their mouths to explore objects and their world. Older children with developmental delays may continue to use their mouths to explore objects like an 18-month-old does as this reflects their developmental age. So, despite on paper being older as they have had their birthday, their brains are still processing information at a much younger age level. This is why they are still putting things in

their mouth as it is normal for this developmental stage. Their behaviour is essentially reflecting the developmental age rather than their actual age. These children need more time to develop past this stage than their typically developing peers.

2. *The child is using the oral sensory seeking input to self-regulate or self-soothe*

Sucking is very calming. It is a strategy that babies use to help self soothe and regulate. Some children continue to use this strategy even when they are older. It can be a useful sign that your toddler or young child is upset, tired or overwhelmed. It can also be an indicator that they do not have another strategy to use to help themselves calm down.

3. *The child is experiencing sensory overload*

Children with sensory processing difficulties can put things in their mouth or chew when they are overloaded too. Chewing is also seen in children with social communication difficulties, autism and sensory issues. Sensory overload occurs when the child or adult has experienced too much sensory input from their environment. Their brains become overwhelmed by the amount of information that they have to process. They, therefore, use the oral sensory seeking to help with self-regulation. Chewing and sucking helps to self soothe so it is a strategy that children and adults use to help to calm themselves down if they are experiencing sensory overload.

4. *In some cases, the child may have problems with their teeth*

In some cases, the child may have problems with their teeth. It may be that their adult teeth are cutting through. However, it could also be a sign of decay, or infection. If this is suspected, the child should have a check-up with their dentist.

5. *They may have a medical condition called 'pica'*

Children with pica put all things, not just food, into their mouths. This could be anything from a cigarette butt, to Lego, dirt or a coin.



Sensory activities to help children who are oral sensory seeking

As a general rule, chewing and sucking have a more calming effect. Crunchy textures can be more alerting, but in some cases can also help to reorganise.

General oral activities to help children oral sensory seekers include:

- Musical instruments such as a harmonica, or recorder
- Whistles
- Party blowers
- Bubble blowing – you can use bubble straws for children who can't use regular wands
- Drinking drinks through a straw
- Water bottles, such as a camelback, that require a strong suck to release the water

For children that prefer sucking you can try:

- Frozen fruit to suck
- Ice cubes to suck
- Sugar free hard lollies / candies
- Lollypops
- Homemade frozen juice sticks (using fruit juice)

If your child prefers crunchy textures you could try:

- Ice cubes
- Popcorn
- Dried banana chips
- Dehydrated vegetable chips/crisps
- Crunchy muesli
- Nuts
- Crunchy muesli bars or flapjacks
- Raw carrot sticks or other raw vegetables

For children who prefer to chew:

Sensory Chews are an excellent way to provide oral stimulation, exercise the mouth muscles, build oral tone, and practise biting/chewing skills. Sensory Chew toys can also be used as oral fidgets, redirecting finger and knuckle biting and other inappropriate chewing habits such as clothing to a safer medium.

Sensory Chew toys are a great calming resource to avoid social breakdown and to create a focal point of calm.

Sensory chews come in various guises such as Sensory chew necklaces through to sensory chew bracelets and hand held sensory chews.



Remember

Remember, most oral sensory seekers are looking for ways to soothe themselves and stay calm. It is a way to self-regulate. So, once you recognise the symptom and its triggers, and find alternative safe self-regulation strategies that work for them, it does not take long for behaviour to change.