

Mouthing items

Mouthing on objects is a very common way for young children to explore new things, and their environment, and is part of normal development. Most babies and toddlers put objects into their mouths, sucking or chewing on them. This helps with their sensory motor development. It helps them to learn more about an object; how big or small it is, how hard or soft it is, and its shape. This behaviour typically reduces from eighteen months, but it can continue up until around two years of age.



While this oral sensory seeking and mouthing stimulation and exploration does gradually decrease, some children continue to seek out this behaviour to the age where it becomes a concern for parents. It is important to note, however, that the frequency can increase when children are teething, and this is considered a normal behaviour.

Past age two, you may see some of the following behaviours:

- Putting toys into their mouth and sucking/chewing on them
- Chewing or sucking their clothes such as their collar or sleeves
- Putting their pencil in their mouth
- Chewing on non-food items, for example, pieces of paper
- Sucking their thumb or biting their nails.



It is important to consider why your child may continue with oral sensory seeking past the expected age.

- Your child may be mouthing to self-regulate. Mouthing can be a sign that your child is upset, tired or overwhelmed
- Your child may be experiencing sensory overload from their environment. Chewing gives lots of powerful proprioceptive input which is very calming



- Older children with developmental delay may continue to explore the world through their mouth. This reflects their developmental age
- Your child may have an issue with their teeth. A dental check up can be helpful
- Your child may not be able to distinguish between edible and non-edible items.

When is mouthing/oral sensory seeking a “problem”?

- Is it impacting on your child's play or attention and concentration?
- Is it damaging your child's clothing or other items?
- Is it causing your child pain or discomfort?
- Are they digesting non food items? If this is the case it would be recommended to make an appointment with your GP to discuss.

It is important to consider and try to identify if there is a pattern to mouthing or oral sensory seeking behaviour.

Keep a record of the following:

- What events or activities trigger it?
- Does it happen more often at home or at school?
- Is it happening more in the morning or the evening?
- Is it happening more often when your child is tired?
- Does it happen more when they are worried?
- Could they be overloaded/overwhelmed?
- Might they be bored?



If there is a pattern you may be able to identify what is increasing your child's arousal.

Advice and strategies:

- Try to distract or redirect your child
- Give your child the chance to use an appropriate alternative such as chewellery, chewable pencil topper or other chewing aids
- You can also provide more opportunities for increase in oral stimulation using oral motor activities (see handout).

Further resources:

For more resources to help with developing skills or for further helpful tips and tricks, please visit our website or lookout for our Facebook posts.

www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/cypot

www.facebook.com/CYPOTNHSBorders

If you would like more information on sensory integration, please watch our mini-series.

[Sensory Integration Mini Series - YouTube](#)

