



Do you have children who seem to always be chewing on something, or licking everything? Those who often put things in their mouth, chew their clothes, and lick things may be oral sensory seeking.

The mouth is a highly sensitive part of the body. It is how babies first explore their world and an important part of development as it brings a massive amount of sensory information into the nervous system. If a child is hyposensitive to sensory input it means that they require more sensory input to meet their needs. It is logical, then, that the mouth and oral seeking can be the “solution”.

Here are some techniques and ideas for providing appropriate oral sensory input. We do not want to stop a child chewing or licking but rather to give them something appropriate and safe to do so.

- Chewy food. There are many options for food that will provide deep sensory input to the mouth such as dried fruits, dense breads such as bagels or ciabatta, granola bars and soft pizza crusts.
- Crunchy food. Crunchy is a different, but intense input for the jaw. Carrots, celery, apples and many other fresh fruits and vegetables fall into this category. Crackers, rice cakes, and breadstick are all crunchy foods which children tend to enjoy.
- Intensely flavoured foods. Some children seek flavourful foods like spicy sauces, or sour flavours like lemon, lime or grapefruit.
- Temperature boost. Using varied temperatures is a great way to provide a very different kind of oral input. Warmed up food (and especially if paired with) cold food is a great way to “surprise” the mouth. Try offering chilled drinks alongside warm foods. Other great cold options are smoothies, frozen berries, and icepops.
- Drinking through a straw. Drinking through a straw provides a lot of oral motor “work” and great sensory input. For a quick focus boost, encourage your child to suck thick smoothie, or soft yogurt through a wide, short straw. The combination of oral motor “work” and drawing in and down of the eyes can bring calm and focus.
- Vibration. Vibration is a great way to provide intense input to the mouth and face. This can be as simple as a vibrating toothbrush or one of the many vibrating therapy tools like Z-vibe(R). Running the vibration around the mouth and face as well as in the mouth can be a great way to meet oral sensory seeking needs.

- “Chewies”. There are many sensory tools available to provide appropriate oral sensory input. They come in different densities, strengths, textures, shapes and sizes. You may want to try several and see what works best for your child. If they are constantly chewing on their clothes, perhaps you want to try a necklace chewy (make sure they are safe with a necklace style and the breakaway clasp for safety is a must).
- Blowing games. These are a great functional way to provide oral input. Blowing bubbles, blowing up balloons, blowing a pinwheel, whistles, recorders and other musical instruments work well. Create a game using a straw and a cotton ball and have them blow it across the room, racing each other, or create their own cotton ball obstacle course.
- Mouth exercises. These can be fun to do when done together in front of a mirror. Stick your tongue out and moving it from side to side. Touch the tip of your tongue to the inside of each tooth. Roll the tongue if you can. Try to touch the tongue to the tip of the nose. Smack the lips together and try making different sounds. Blow the cheeks full of air and hold for a few seconds. Model creative and safe ways to get sensory input through their mouth.

It is not always easy to discover what sensory input a child is seeking so it is important to observe them and see if there are any trigger to their behaviour. Are they upset? Finding it hard to focus? Anxious? Dysregulated? Bored? Or are they happy and enjoying themselves? Paying attention to what happens before they start the habit may give you some really important clues. It is important not to stop their behaviours but to instead find those acceptable safe alternatives. This may take a lot of trial and effort to see what works best for the child so make sure that the new, acceptable options are easily available for the child to access.

Using fidget toys can sometimes reduce chewing and licking, along with using other movements, as this can sometimes replace the need to chew or lick through other sensory inputs.

