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Sensory Processing: Helping Children/Youth who are Oral Seeking



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Summary: All human beings have a need for oral sensory input, such as from eating, chewing, sucking or biting. Some people have a higher than usual need for oral sensory input, to the point that it can cause problems from destroying pens, pencils, clothing or other items. The good news is that many things can be done to help. It is usually not helpful to simply punish the behaviour, as the behaviour is meant to self-regulate. The solution includes finding out what is underneath the behaviour. Are they bored and understimulated and trying to increase stimulation? Are they overwhelmed and stressed? If so, how can we address their stress. And then we can replace the not so helpful oral behaviours with more helpful ways to self-regulate. It might be providing alternative means of oral sensory input (e.g. safe yet indestructible things to chew on, chewy or crunchy foods, etc.), as well as other types of organizing and calming sensory input (e.g. tactile, deep pressure, movement, or others).

J's Story

J. is a 7-yo child who chews on everything. At school, he destroys pencils and pens by chewing on them, which leads the teachers to get upset. It makes him shunned by others due to pandemic worries about germs. At home, he chews on his toys, his bedsheets, his clothes.

It is to the point where parents have to constantly replace items at home, causing financial stress on the family.

Parents have tried all sorts of consequences and punishment to get J. to stop chewing things, but nothing seems to work.

What now?

Signs of Oral Seeking

Are there any of the following signs of strong oral needs such as excessive:

- Sucking or chewing on shirts and clothing?
- Seeking out strong or extreme food flavours, e.g. extreme sweet, extreme sour, etc.?
- Chewing on pencils / pens or toys?
- Swallows their food whole or taking large bites of food at a time
- Enjoys an electric toothbrush

If so, it may indicate that they are looking for oral sensory input. Read on to learn more.

Introduction

It is normal for human beings to have oral sensory needs.

In normal development, infants need to feed in order to survive, so it is natural that meeting oral sensory / motor needs is self-regulating. For example, an infant that is upset, and calms when given breast milk to suck and drink; or when given a soother to suck.

As humans get older, chewing, sucking and biting meets sensory needs, even when people are not hungry or thirsty.

Oral sensory input is powerful and unique because:

- It helps when we are bored or understimulated. Oral sensory input provides sufficient stimulation to “feeling calm, “just right”, back “in the green zone”.
- Example
    - Child who is bored in class, and chews on their pencil.
- It helps when we are stressed or overstimulated. Oral sensory input is calming and helps people calm down to be “just right”, back “in the green zone”.
- Example
    - Adult who is stressed out at work, and chews on their pen when stressed.

Oral sensory input is unique in that it can be helpful whether people are under or overstimulated. Not all sensory inputs are like this. For example, while many people like background music when they are bored, most people do not want more background music or noise when they are upset.

Why Do Some People Need to Constantly Chew, Suck or Bite on Things?

While it is normal for everyone to have oral sensory / motor needs, some people seem to have a higher need.

This can be due to many reasons including:

- The person is under stress, and is trying to self-regulate with oral sensory/motor input. After all, oral sensory /motor input is one of the most effective ways to self-regulation.
- The person is understimulated, not stressed or overstimulated, and needs more sensory input.
    - When understimulated, people may appear bored, and have troubles paying attention.
    - They might have oral hyposensitivity, i.e. their oral system is under sensitive to oral sensory input.
    - Examples
        - They may not notice that they have enough food in their mouth, and so they may be stuffing their mouth too full.
        - They be constantly putting things in their mouth, even when they are not hungry.

A study with university students actually showed that chewing cinnamon gum improved how students did on a test. The theory would be that the cinnamon gum helped students self-regulate into an alert state, thus doing better.

Ways to Provide Oral Sensory Stimulation

Provide deep pressure oral stimulation

- Things to chew on
    - Chewing gum, straws, plastic tubing, ice
    - Chewable toys such as

            - Chewy Tubes
            - Raindrop Rainforest Necklace
            - Chewy Pencil Toppers
            - Chewable Gem Necklace
            - Chewable Bracelets
            - Soothasaurus Rubber Dinosaur
            - Sensory Stixx
            - GoGoChews Chewable Pencil Toppers
            - Tactile Chewable Armband
            - Ark's Grabber Oral Motor Chew
- Things to eat
    - Try different consistency and textures
        - Chewy snacks such as
            - Licorice, licorice strings
            - Raisins
            - Fruit leathers (e.g. Fruit roll ups).
        - Crunchy snacks such as
            - Granola bars
            - Apples, carrots, dried bananas, nuts (e.g. almonds, peanuts).
            - Popcorn, pretzels, crackers.
        - Thick and bumpy textures such as
            - Oatmeal or apple sauce
    - Try different tastes
        - Salty (popcorn)
        - Sweet (candy or dried fruit)
        - Sour (sour fruit such as grapefruit, lemon, limes, sour candy or pickles)
        - Spicy (salsa or cinnamon)
    - Try different temperatures
        - Cold (e.g. cold ice cream, ice chips)
        - Warm / hot (e.g. hot oatmeal, soup).
- Things to lick
    - Things that require licking or sucking also help with those who have speech/language problems.Lollipop, popsicle, ice cream in a cone (provides more sensory input than simply eating ice cream from a cups
- Lips and tongue
    - Activities that use the lips and tongue help with oral sensitivity.
    - Things to suck on
        - A straw (give your child things to pick up using a straw, such as cereal, paper, etc.),
        - Water bottle, such as a CamelBak which has a great mouthpiece to suck on, and helps children stay hydrated all day.
        - Hard candy, home made popsicles, lollipops
        - Try small straws (e.g. coffee stirrers, regular straws, curly straws) to drink fruit smoothies, non-dairy yogurt, or non-dairy pudding to make sucking more challenging (i.e. "resistive sucking").
    - Things to blow
        - Blowing through a straw, blowing up balloons
        - Blowing bubbles (challenge them by asking them to make a "bubble mountain", i.e. a mountain of bubbles)
        - Musical instruments such as kazoo, harmonica, recorder, whistle.
    - Things to put in the mouth
        - Electric toothbrush.

When and Where to Get Help?

Is the person having troubles functioning at home, school or other environments?
Are the oral behaviours causing problems? (E.g. the child is chewing things to the point where it causes problems, e.g. destroying clothing, pencils and other objects to the point it is a financial stress on the family?)

If so, then consider seeing a professional for help such as an occupational therapist for help.

About This Fact Sheet

Written by the eMentalHealth Team.

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