

Oral-Motor Suggestions

Oral-motor involves activities of the mouth – chewing, swallowing, sucking, blowing, talking, eating and teeth brushing. Because we react to sensation in a way that is very individual, a child may crave oral-motor experiences or may dislike things in their mouth and have very specific food preferences.

Key Principles

- An oral-motor program can help children who enjoy oral-motor stimulation activities and may need to participate in such activities more frequently to decrease inappropriate mouthing of objects.
- An oral-motor program can also help children that are sensory sensitive since it can help them build a tolerance to oral sensory stimulation including teeth brushing and different food textures.
- Oral-motor program should precede meals/snacks.
- Always begin programs within the child's level of tolerance/comfort. If a child responds well to the experience, you may present it more intensively. If a child shows stress signals, step back and re-assess activities that were presented.
- Use of a mirror reduces anxiety and increases visual awareness.
- The sensory input to the mouth and jaw when chewing can help calm the nervous system when overstimulated, nervous, or overwhelmed. It can also help 'rev up' the system if the child needs additional input.

Progression

- Prepare the child for oral-motor program by starting sensory stimulation on arms and hands----- work up to the neck----- chin/ external cheeks----- lips ----- into the mouth ----- teeth/gums-----inside cheeks----- tongue----- hard palate. Pay attention to child's reaction and progress only as tolerated.

Texture

- Always start with smooth to soft textural objects and progress to unusual textures then prickly/rough textured objects. Examples: Rub different textures around mouth with soft material (flannel/velvet, cotton balls, feathers). Progress to unusual textures (corduroy, body pouf, Koosh ball). If this is tolerated, progress to prickly textures (corrugated paper, loofa sponge, soft-bristled brush).

Pressure

- Always start with **firm** pressure and progress to *light*. * Children known to have hypersensitivity have a better tolerance to smooth textures (including foods such as purees) and firm pressure.

Vibration

- Consider using a Z-vibe tool, which provides a low intensity vibration. Other tools include the “Jiggler”, hand held massager, and vibrating toothbrush – which provide more intense vibration stimulation and may be less tolerated than the Z-vibe tool. These items are available for purchase online (ex: www.fdmmt.ca). **Be sure to avoid the ear area (centre of balance) when applying vibration to the face as it may cause dizziness or nausea.**
- Some children may not be able to tolerate direct contact with the vibrating toy/massager or toothbrush; instead, try to hold the vibrating toy or toothbrush in your hand while touching the child’s cheek with your extended index finger that will vibrate less intensely.

Oral-Motor Sensory Activity Ideas

*Always with supervision and as tolerated by child

- Chewing on straws, latex-free tubing, “Chewy” tools, chewing gum and gummy candies (if these can be safely managed).
- Eating “alerting” food items (i.e. sour fruit popsicles or fruit) and crunchy foods (i.e. raw vegetables and crunchy crackers) to keep their mouth muscles stimulated.
- Blowing on musical instruments and blower toys.
- Suck thick beverages (i.e. smoothies) through a straw.
- Provide ice on a stick and rub on lips (frozen cold things are alerting; instead of ice, consider using frozen banana, grapes or popsicles).
- Rub lips with sour or spicy/bitter foods (i.e. lollipop, cinnamon candy, lemonade).
- Rub lips with sticky food (i.e. peanut butter, cream cheese, caramel, cotton candy).
- Encourage the child to suck on popsicles.

- Soak toothette in orange/apple/grape juice and rub on lips.
- Introduce toothette inside of mouth encouraging child to munch on toothette.
- Rub lotion on face using progression identified above.
- Rub inside of mouth using gloved finger (with caution).
- *Bubble Volcano* – Fill a bowl with water and have the child blow bubbles with a straw (bendy or curly straws may work best); once the child is able to blow consistently (not sucking in the water) you could add soap to create many bubbles.
- *Blower Knockdown* – Set up small figures/toys; have the child lie on their stomach; using a party blower they can blow to knock down items (pretend to be a lizard with a long tongue catching food, etc.)
- *Straw Art Pick-Up* – Cut out different shapes from construction paper; the child uses a straw to ‘pick-up’ the pictures by sucking in and then could be encouraged to place them on another page.
- *Curly Straws* – The extra work required from drinking through a curly straw can assist with regulation and strengthening.
- *Cotton Ball Hockey* – Using a straw have the child blow a cotton ball ‘puck’ across the table into an identified ‘goal’ area.
- Proprioceptive opportunities/input can be provided by the use of wearable, chewable items.

If the child shows stress signals, step back to re-assess activities that were presented, and discontinue activity. Any oral motor stimulation activities should be closely supervised to ensure safety, especially when incorporating chewing activities.

* Recommendations were compiled from various web resources and therapists’ experiences.