



TIPS IF YOU HAVE A CHILD THAT CHEWS

Question 1 – Where and how does your child chew?

Remember that chewing provides extra **proprioceptive** sensory input. So, where and how your child chews is important.

By where, we mean where in the mouth? Have a look when your child is chewing. Is the item at the front of their mouth? Or, is it at the back? Do they bite down hard? Or, do they suck?

Chewing is a sensory task. Therefore, it's important to consider how your child is chewing as this will help you to know which type of chew toy will best suit your child. So, observe them for a few days. Really look!

When a child is sucking at the front, a rounder chew toy can sometimes be preferred. However, if they like to chew at the back of their teeth, a longer chew toy will be better.

Also, consider how hard they chew. If your child chews down really hard, then you will need to consider a tougher sensory chew toy. If they suck, then a softer one might give them more feedback.

Question 2 – What texture and shape do they prefer when chewing?

Many children like to chew on clothing. When given a sensory chew toy, some children don't use it. They prefer to chew on their clothing, or maybe they prefer a favourite toy. That's why it is really important to consider texture and shape, starting with what the child already chews on.

Material is a very different texture to a piece of Lego. Look at what your child prefers. If they chew material, they may prefer a bandana rather than a chew, as this is their preferred texture.

Sensory chew toys come in a variety of textures. Firstly, they may be harder or softer. This is important to consider as if the child likes a bit more feedback then they will need a softer toy. Secondly, they can have textured patterns on them. Every child is different. Some like these patterns and others don't.

Question 3 – Are sensory chew toys age and/or socially appropriate for the child?

For children with significant learning disabilities, a sensory chew toy may not look out of place. This is especially true if they are in a specialist school and surrounded by other children who have chew toys. The same is true for younger children. Under the age of five it would not necessarily look out of place.

However, for children in mainstream school who have a high level of social awareness, a sensory chew toy may not be appropriate. Firstly, they might not want to look different. Secondly, it may draw unwanted attention from their peers. In saying that, there are some children who don't mind what their peers think and are happy to have their chew. Every child is different and individualised support is always the best option.

Next steps for choosing between available sensory chew toys

Before you start

Avoid cheaper alternatives for sensory chew toys

There are many suggestions online for inexpensive chew toy solutions such as aquarium tubing or straws. We understand why parents would prefer a less expensive option but it is difficult to know whether they are safe.

This is because, often, single use plastic products contain BPA. BPA stands for bisphenol A, an industrial chemical that has been used to make certain plastics and resins since the 1960s. Both the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) agree that there is evidence that BPA has endocrine disrupting properties. This led them to the decision to strictly limit its use in food contact areas such as food and drink packaging.

We recommend only buying sensory chew toys, which have been specifically designed for children to chew on, from reputable companies.

Don't forget a cleaning schedule

It's important to make sure you wash the chew regularly. Most manufacturers have a recommendation on how their chews should be washed. As chews are not shared, usually hot soapy water is sufficient. Some can also go on the top shelf in the dishwasher.

Choose sensory chew toys that match how the child chews

If children chew at the back of their mouth

These children usually prefer a chew that has a longer sticky part. So, the P, I and X shaped sensory chews with longer arms can be a hit. Often these children prefer slightly harder chews.

When children prefer to chew or suck at the front

A rounder chew can be more suitable for these children. There are many different options with various textures. Often these children prefer softer chews and ones with a bit more flexibility. The 'dog tag' style can also be particularly good for children who like to suck

For children who chew everywhere their mouth

Look for a chew that has both a long and round part. The person shaped toys, for example, can be useful in this case as they have a rounder part at the head and longer parts at the legs and arms.

For children who eat through their sensory chew toys quickly

These children need a tougher chew. There is one called the 'Chew Stixx Tough Bar'

Other options that are available

Less 'obvious' sensory chew toys

There are a few sensory chews that look like jewellery, one is called 'chewlry.' These are useful for children who don't chew too heavily and those that suck. They tend to break quite quickly with children who chew heavily. Chewigem also do a range of bracelets and necklaces.

In addition, pencil toppers are available. These sit on top of a pencil and allow the child to chew the topper rather than the pencil. They tend to only work for children who are already chewing their pencil and for those that don't bite down too hard.

Vibrating sensory chew toys

In some cases, vibration can be helpful for short periods. There is a product called the 'ARK z-vibe' and also one called 'VibraZilla' which are very robust and designed for children. It is best to search using the specific terms or to look on sensory supplier websites.

What about lanyards that are available for sensory chew toys?

For some children a lanyard can help to keep the chew toy with them. Some parents also make their own using a piece of ribbon and a safety pin and affix the toy to the child's clothing. It will really depend on the child's individual needs.

If the child doesn't have a lanyard, it can be very helpful to have a specific container where they can store the toy. This could be a plastic container on their desk. It doesn't need to be fancy. It just needs to be a place they can store it. This helps for two reasons. Firstly, it's easier to find. Secondly, and more importantly, it is more hygienic than the child just leaving the toy around on any surface.

When material is preferred

Children who prefer the texture of material may reject a chew. It's common that these children will also forget to use their chew and will just continue to chew on their clothing. A bandana tied around the child's neck can be a good alternative for two reasons. Firstly, they can help to save clothing. Secondly, they can be changed as often as needed, which also stops the child's clothing from being saturated.

Alternatives to sensory chew toys

For older children, chewing sugar-free gum can be a great alternative. You may need to establish rules around using the gum. For example: 'It must go into a tissue then into the bin'; 'You must keep it inside your mouth'; and 'No bubble blowing.' Many children can manage this, especially if they find it is helping their concentration. Using two pieces of gum can also help, as it gives even more resistance during chewing. In addition, different chewy foods can be included at snack and meal times. Some examples of chewy foods include:

- Dried fruit – mango is particularly good, as is apple, papaya, pineapple, and small bananas
- Bagels
- Chewy muesli bars
- Chewy flapjacks
- Liquorice

In conclusion

Whilst there are a huge number of sensory chew toys available, it is important to consider the best option for each individual child.

There is "no one size fits all solution".

Sourced from:

A sensory Life, Angie Voss

Your Kids Table

