

Recommendations

The oral motor and taste sensory system plays a vital role in how children explore, experience, and regulate their world. It involves the mouth, tongue, lips, jaw, and throat, and includes both motor functions (e.g., sucking, chewing, swallowing, and speech articulation) and sensory functions (e.g., detecting taste, texture, and temperature). This system is deeply connected to regulation, feeding, communication, and sensory comfort.

For babies and young children, oral exploration is a key way to interact with their environment. However, for children who have experienced developmental trauma, including neglect, inconsistent feeding, force-feeding, or a lack of nurturing touch, the oral sensory system may be significantly impacted.



What might you notice?

A Child who seeks oral input:

- Chewing on clothes, pencils, toys, or fingers
- Mouthing or sucking non-food items
- Preference for strong flavours (spicy, sour)
- Biting others/self when dysregulated

Possible causes:

- Oral hyposensitivity (under-responsive system)
- Missed early oral exploration
- Self-soothing (proprioception) in response to stress or dysregulation

Child who avoids or is sensitive to oral input

- Gagging or food refusal
- Sensitivity to textures, temperatures, or smells
- Avoidance of tooth brushing or facial contact
- Restrictive / bland diet

Possible causes:

- Oral hypersensitivity (over-responsive system)
- Negative past experiences (e.g., force-feeding, medical trauma)

Oral Motor Difficulties

- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, or coordinating oral movements
- Drooling
- Unclear speech or delayed speech development

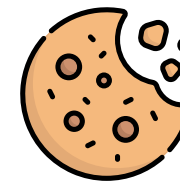
Possible causes:

- Delayed oral motor skill development due to trauma, neglect, or limited early experiences.
- Physical health conditions to be explored through paediatrician or SALT



TASTE HACKS & SNACKS

Strategies for children who have oral sensory needs



Children who are sensitive to taste

- Offer familiar and predictable foods – stick with known flavours and textures to reduce anxiety.
- Use visual food schedules – show what's coming up at snack or mealtime to reduce uncertainty.
- Respect food refusal – avoid forcing or bribing; allow the child to explore at their own pace.
- Involve them in food prep – handling and smelling food without pressure to eat can build tolerance.
- Start with tiny tastes – a 'taste plate' with micro-portions or dips for exploring new flavours safely.
- Offer bland or neutral flavours – avoid strong or spicy foods that may be overwhelming.
- Give control – offer choices between 2-3 foods to build autonomy and reduce stress.
- Desensitise through play – use messy play or food-based art to build comfort with textures.
- Try flavoured toothpastes or unflavoured non-foaming toothpaste such as Hismile or Oranurse
- Experiment with different toothbrushes – try softer bristles, silicone or a vibrating toothbrush for more consistent pressure.

Oral Motor difficulties

- Blow bubbles through different tools – straws, whistles, or bubble blowers build lip strength.
- Use chewy resistive foods – bagels, dried fruit, or chewy granola bars to strengthen jaw muscles.
- Try lip-strengthening games – holding a straw or spaghetti between lips or blowing raspberries.
- Encourage straw drinking – use thick liquids or thin/ curly straws to challenge the muscles.
- Play "copy my face" games – make exaggerated mouth shapes to improve oral awareness and control.
- Use chewy tubes or resistance tools – specifically designed oral motor strengthening aids.
- Offer frequent oral breaks during speech tasks – chewing or sucking to re-energise the muscles.
- Practice 'pop and click' sounds – fun, silly noises that also build coordination and tone.
- Blow bubbles into a glass of milk – fill the glass only a little and ask the child to blow bubbles so it reaches the top of the glass but doesn't overflow.



Voice of the child Questions to ask

- “Do you like strong tastes, like really sour sweets or spicy crisps, or do you prefer plain things like toast or pasta?”
- “If you could only eat one type of food forever, what would it be – something crunchy, soft, chewy, or smooth?”
- “Are there any foods that make your mouth feel funny, like too spicy, too tingly, or too strong?”
- “Do you like trying new foods, or do you like to stick to the ones you already know?”
- “When you feel wiggly or upset, are there any snacks or drinks that help you feel better?”

Children who seek more taste input

- Provide strong flavours – such as sour sweets, salty snacks, or spicy sauces (as appropriate).
- Offer crunchy and chewy snacks – like carrots, breadsticks, dried fruit, or granola bars.
- Use a “chew toolkit” – offer chewable items like chewable jewellery or silicone pencil toppers.
- Introduce safe taste challenges – with supervision, explore strong flavours like lemon or vinegar.
- Offer frequent sensory breaks with oral input – chewing gum, sipping through a straw, or sucking thick smoothies.
- Use oral input during transitions – like a sour sweet before going into class to help regulate or a minty polo sucked.
- Try temperature contrast foods – frozen grapes, warm soup, or ice cubes can increase sensory input.
- Encourage crunchy foods in lunchboxes – great for helping with focus and oral regulation.
- Use oral sensory jars – a toolkit with a few flavourful, chewy snacks or chew tools to help regulate.
- Explore safe non-food oral input – blowing whistles, bubble wands, or sucking through curly straws.

Calming oral strategies

- Use thick liquids through a thin or curly straw – like smoothies, yogurt, or milkshakes to create calming resistance.
- Offer chewy or crunchy snacks – such as bagels, apples, rice cakes, scone, popcorn, or dried fruit to provide grounding input.
- Encourage deep breathing through the mouth – blowing bubbles, straw table football, or slow exhalation games, blowing up a balloon or inflatable.
- Use oral fidgets – chew necklaces or tubes can provide calming, rhythmic input.
- Try warm herbal teas, hot chocolate or milk – soothing temperatures can calm the oral sensory system.
- Provide suckable snacks – such as sugar-free polos or ice pops for slow, calming input.
- Use rhythmic oral input – singing, humming, or chanting can soothe and regulate.
- Try oral-motor games – blowing up balloons or using straws to move cotton balls.