

Dudley Children's Occupational Therapy Service
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Managing Chewing of Non-Food Items

Chewing or mouthing objects is a natural developmental phase that children go through up until approximately 2 years old. Babies and young children suck or mouth objects to explore the world, as well as to self soothe, calm or to relieve pain when teething.

Some children may continue to chew or mouth non-food objects beyond this. This may be due to medical, dietary, sensory or behavioural issues including:

- Relieving anxiety or frustration
- Relieving pain or discomfort
- Not understanding which items are edible or inedible
- Continuation or late occurrence of the infant mouthing stage
- Iron deficiency or malnutrition
- Seeking sensory input from the texture or taste of objects
- Seeking attention if the child enjoys the interaction they get as a result of chewing
- Avoiding a demand or ending an undesired situation
- Using the chewing as a way to communicate their needs, wants or feelings.

Behaviour diary

It is important to rule out medical or dental causes initially by visiting your GP and dentist. Take along your observations so you can explain it in more detail, considering the following:

- **Identify** the problem behaviour, how frequently does it occur, for how long and how often is it repeated?
- Think about why you want to change the behaviour, is it causing harm, or is it a problem in the way others perceive it?
- **Triggers** - Think about what happens before the behaviour, where does it happen, what is the environment, who is present, are there times when the behaviour does not occur? Try changing one of these and observe whether this changes the behaviour. For example if you think the behaviour is sensory based then try some of the strategies below.
- **Behaviour** - What is the function of the behaviour, what is the child trying to get or avoid or communicate?
- **Consequences** - What are the consequences, what happens after the behaviour, what does the child get, how do people react, what changes occur in the child? Can you make any changes here that will reduce the incidence of the behaviour?
- **Motivators** – Think about suitable motivators or reinforcers to encourage positive behaviours. Motivators could include sensory strategies as detailed below. Reinforcers could include praise, stickers, treats or screen time (often a powerful reinforcer for children on the autistic spectrum). Consider how frequently these will be used and how to phase them out.

General strategies:

- Ensure your child is getting enough vitamins and minerals in their diet. If they are a selective eater then ensure they take vitamin and mineral supplements. Speak to your GP, Health Visitor or School Nurse about suitable supplements.
- Redirect the child to a suitable activity or a more suitable object to chew (see sensory strategies and chew toys sections). Use visual cues such as picture symbols to back up instructions using their preferred method of communication. Try redirecting the child to an activity that uses both hands or occupies the mouth (such as chewing a food item). Provide praise and positive reinforcement for the appropriate behaviour.
- Provide frequent reward for appropriate behaviours. This could be verbal praise or attention, preferred activities or toys, tokens or small amounts of favourite food or drink. Name the behaviour you are rewarding and ensure the reward is provided immediately after the behaviour that you wish to encourage.
- Respond quickly and consistently but try to limit verbal comments or facial expressions as these may act to reinforce the chewing / mouthing of inappropriate objects. Speak calmly and clearly in a neutral voice.
- Introduce communication tools – liaise with your Speech and Language Therapist if communication is an issue for your child. If the child is able to understand then ensure you communicate with them why the behaviour is undesirable or dangerous.
- Teach your child about edible and non-edible objects – use social stories or consider playing sorting games with edible and non-edible objects.
- Prepare your child for predictable change, using visual supports if required.
- Provide more structure, particularly around transition times as the child may find it hard to adjust from one activity to the next. Try using visual timetables or timers or other visual supports. Keep the waiting time between activities as short as possible and use a visual measure of time e.g. a sand timer to help them understand how long it will be. Consider using a transition box of appropriate activities that they can do in unstructured time between activities.

Sensory strategies

Children may be chewing non-food objects to gain increased sensory feedback. They may be seeking information about the taste or texture of specific non-food items or they may be seeking increased proprioceptive feedback. Proprioceptive input is received from active movement of muscles and joints. Chewing therefore provides a boost of proprioceptive input as the muscles are working against resistance. It activates a part of the nervous system that helps slow heart rate and blood pressure and promotes digestion as well as increasing alertness and attention levels. In addition to this, it links to the area of the brain that regulates emotions and behaviour, which helps with self-regulation of levels of alertness or anxiety. Chewing is also a predictable, repetitive movement which can be calming.

The following activities may help provide appropriate sensory feedback in order to reduce chewing non-food objects. Building these activities into your child's day may help them to regulate their levels of alertness and reduce their desire to mouth.

- Use chewy toys to replace the inappropriate item with. There are a range of different chewy toys and they are available in a range of different strengths depending upon your child's needs. There is a list of some of the products that are available at the end of this sheet.
- Eating foods such as carrot or celery sticks, dried fruit, gummy bears or other chewy sweets, liquorice, bagels, chewing gum, raisins, pretzels, popcorn, marshmallows, etc.
- Try spicy or strong flavoured foods for increased oral sensory feedback.

- Resistive sucking using items such as sports bottles with long straws, spouted cups, drinking milkshake through a straw, sucking lollipops etc.
- Blowing activities such as bubbles, balloons, whistles or kazoos, wind instruments, splatter paintings through a straw.
- Make faces in a mirror or imitate other people's funny faces, try stretching mouth open wide, sticking tongue out or sticking tongue in side of cheek and pushing cheek out, smiling, frowning, filling cheeks up with air and blowing out slowly.
- Facial massage, applying firm pressure to massage the cheeks in small circular movements.
- Provide regular heavy work activities throughout the day such as encouraging the child to push a doll in a buggy, pushing a shopping trolley, carrying a heavy backpack, digging in the garden, climbing on playground equipment and jumping on a trampoline.
- Try using an electric toothbrush for increased tactile feedback.
- Think about the sensory environment. Is the child struggling to cope with other sensory input and using the chewing as a coping mechanism? Try modifying the environment if possible to change this.
- Create opportunities for activities throughout the day that your child might find relaxing, for example, watching a bubble tube lamp, smelling essential oils, listening to music, massage, swinging on a swing or sitting on a beanbag in a pop up tent.

Extra help with difficult behaviour

Don't feel you have to cope alone. If you're struggling with your child's behaviour:

- Talk to your health visitor or GP – they may be able to suggest some new strategies to try.
- Visit the Family Lives website for parenting advice and support, or phone their free parents' helpline on 0808 800 2222.
- Download the NSPCC's guide to positive parenting or call their free helpline on 0808 800 5000.

References and useful websites:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx>

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/other/pica>

www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/dealing-with-difficult-behaviour/



Black Country Healthcare

NHS Foundation Trust

Example behaviour diary

Name.....

Observer.....

Behaviours.....

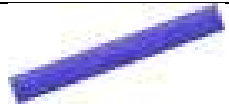
Date	Time	Antecedent / setting	Behaviour	Consequence	Possible reason



Chewy toys

There are many different suppliers of chewy items in different strengths ranging from baby teether ones to chewy tubes intended for adolescents and adults. Prices depend upon item. Please note this is not an exhaustive list and we do not recommend any company in particular.

Sensory needs - www.sensoryneeds.co.uk

		
Mini chewy teether	Chewy P's teether	Chewy P's and Q's knobbly teether
		
Chewy tube smooth	Super chewy tube knobbly	Super chewy tube smooth
		
Chewy tube knobbly	Chewy spoon	Tough bar for extreme biting
		
Sensory stixx	Chew stixx reach – different textures	Grip stixx - chew stixx – different textures
		
Chewy stixx pencil toppers	Chewable ruler	

Gummee - www.gummee.life



Also provide a guide to teething and recommend products for developmental stage.

There is a happy hands mouthing glove for older ages

Sensory direct - www.sensorydirect.com

		
Chewybuddy sensory chew	Chewybuddy disc	Chewybuddy tag

Monster chew ghost	Monster chew skull	Chewybuddy bangle
Chewybuddy pencil toppers	Chewy necklace	Ark chewy brick stick
Ark vibration kit	Ark z vibe vibrating tool	

TTS - www.tts-group.co.uk

Emotion chew bangle	Sensory chewy wave bangle	Button pendant chew
Calming fidget chews	Clear fidget chews	DNZ vibe speech enhancer