Regulating with Our Mouths

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As parents and therapists we usually pay attention to all the gross and fine motor developmental milestones that our children reach, however we tend to overlook the development of their sensory systems until an issue arises. When a child presents regulatory concerns, we often times forget to review their oral motor development, especially if there were no major concerns with textures or feeding. However, as an infant this is one of the first ways a child learns to calm himself. From sucking his thumb in utero, to sucking on a binky or bottle, infants tend to regulate themselves with oral input. In addition, sucking provides a child with the ability to strengthen oral muscles and integrate both sides of the brain. Therefore, we are going to take a look at ways to integrate oral input into your daily sensory diets or treatments to help with overall regulation for your children.

There are many ways to integrate oral input into a sensory diet. For children who have few or no issues with textures and feeding, using a variety of food substances works great and is easy to incorporate in a functional way. For the under-responsive, low arousal child, tart and sour candies such as Sour Patch Kids, Pop Rocks, or sour gum are excellent ways to get their systems revved up. In addition, sucking on a lemon or drinking cold lemonade offers a less sugary approach. If you are trying to get a child to decrease his arousal level, providing tough, chewy items or thick, crunchy items are great inputs. Having a child chew on a mini Tootsie Roll, Starburst, or taffy not only provides deep proprioceptive input for regulation, but they are also great ways to strengthen the oral region. Add a chewy mini bagel, crunchy carrots or celery, or sourdough pretzels to any meal for instant ways to calm. And you cannot forget the importance of sucking and straw use for regulation. Experiment with various straw sizes and liquids of different consistencies. For example, why not try having your child suck pudding through a straw, or instead of using a regular straw, let your child drink through a coffee stirrer. Now during the summer weather, enjoy a thick milkshake, but increase the challenge by using a thinner straw. And using any hard candy or mints to suck on are great for improving attention and focus.

For oral motor strengthening and to provide input for the sensory seeker using non-edible objects, such as Chewy tubes and whistles are ideal ways to add oral activities to your sensory treatment. Chewy tubes are great for the oral sensory seeker who needs constant input. In addition, there are also items available such as pencil toppers and chewable jewelry that allow a child to have easy, more appropriate means to achieving this. Using whistles of different shapes and sizes, and that require various amounts of lip closer strengths the oral region while providing regulation through deep breaths and blowing. In addition, to using whistles try making an at home band by using harmonicas and recorders.

Bubble blowing and straw games are more exciting ways to achieve regulation. In stores there are a variety of bubble blowers, but there are also some great ideas to make these at home, such as using plastic milk cartons or pop bottles with the bottom cut off. Try doing some Straw Olympics by using both long and short straws to race various items, such as cotton balls, mini marshmallows, or Gold Fish crackers. Tape down a path and use visual skills to blow these items through a maze. The creative possibilities are endless.

It is important for us to think about how we, as adults, use oral input to keep our systems regulated. Whether it is chewing gum to keep yourself focused during that very important staff meeting, or snacking on pretzels bites during a long road trip, we often use oral techniques naturally. Therefore, it is also important to remember to incorporate oral activities and strategies when trying to increase focus, especially during fine motor and school activities and not to overlook this sensory system.

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