

Oral Exploration: The Window to Their World



Introduction to Infant Mouthing

Did you ever wonder why babies mouth so much? They are learning about their world! Babies experience the world through their mouths – their mouth is their primary learning tool. Through this a baby will experience size, shape, texture, taste, and temperature; and at the same time will be preparing their mouth for more complicated oral tasks involved with feeding and speech development. Babies also use oral play and exploration as a source of comfort and organization. Whether it is a newborn sucking a nipple or a teething six-month-old biting a finger, oral experiences are relaxing and comforting.

Babies begin to explore with their mouths even before they are born. Thumb sucking has been noted in utero as early as 16 weeks gestation. At birth the sensation in and around the mouth is the most highly developed. Most children are eager to suck and should enjoy oral and facial touches from caregivers, soft blankets and warm hands. By 4-6 months most babies have now developed greater body control and strength. They are learning to sit without support, reach for and hold toys, and bring toys to their mouths. Now the learning really begins! Everything must be taste-tested and explored, licked and drooled on! It is at this point where concerns about germs or choking are high. But don't worry, as long as you keep a fairly clean house and monitor what objects are available, there should be no problem. Remember, keeping babies from mouthing and drooling on objects and toys will keep them from learning and being comforted.

Children with medical or developmental difficulties

Children with medical or developmental difficulties may lack these early oral experiences. Children with motor difficulties may not have the motor ability to hold toys or bring them to their mouths, and therefore have limited opportunities for oral exploration. Children who have experienced hospital procedures such as intubation, suctioning, etc. can often develop the idea that the mouth and throat hurts and should be avoided. Similarly, children with reflux who experience discomfort during and after feeding may also associate oral experiences as painful and unpleasant.

As parents and caregivers, we need to identify situations or difficulties that may interfere with a child's abilities to experience their world through oral exploration. By providing pleasurable oral and facial input, oral development can begin to re-shape early learning experiences and set the stage for more positive and earlier experiences with food.