

MOUTH TOYS OPEN THE SENSORY DOORWAY

MOUTH-TOYS are designed to provide pleasure and comfort to the mouths of infants and young children. Most toys are designed for children who are at a developmental age when mouthing behaviors are common. Because this occurs primarily during teething, the majority of these toys are marketed as "teethers" or "teething toys." The idea that these same toys serve many other purposes in development is new to many parents and therapists. MOUTH-TOYS provide numerous learning opportunities that introduce children to the sensory world, and prepare the mouth for more complex feeding skills.

Why do infants and children put toys and other objects in their mouths?

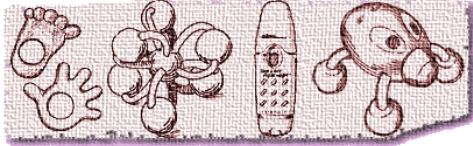
At birth sensations in the mouth are more highly developed than in any other part of the body. The mouth is truly the baby's "window to the world." Many babies use the mouth before they are born to suck their fingers and make discoveries about their intrauterine world. After birth babies continue to put their own hands in the mouth, and suck or mouth the fingers of a parent, the edge of a blanket, clothing, pacifiers, and other objects that come in contact with the mouth. This generalized mouthing predominates during the first 4-5 months of life. Through this type of mouthing the baby becomes familiar with general sensations of softness, firmness, and hardness. These sensations familiarize the child with the sensations they will encounter as they move from the nipple to a spoon or cup.

By 6 months infants are typically able to sit without support, push up on their arms when lying on the tummy, and reach out for toys. They have developed greater stability in the trunk and shoulder girdle that creates a foundation for more skillful movements of both the hand and mouth. The child is now able to hold onto toys without dropping them, and to move them around in the mouth to explore all surfaces. The jaw makes more skillful adjustments in opening and closing, the tongue moves with greater freedom in the mouth, and the lips come forward like a pair of small hands to feel the surface of anything entering the mouth. With this new discriminative mouthing, the child uses the mouth to extract all types of sensory information from whatever enters. By exploring the toy with the tongue, lips, and jaw the child finds out about size, shape, surface texture, taste, and weight. When children are introduced to solid foods, they will encounter the same sensory features that they have explored with toys. They are free to expand their sensory awareness and discrimination and learn how to move smaller pieces around and swallow safely and comfortably.

Sensations from the gums draw the child's awareness to the mouth during teething. This increases the desire to put things in the mouth. Children discover sensations that increase comfort, and increase their biting, chewing, and oral exploration of toys. The infant who lacks the coordination to chew and swallow food is protected by an active gag reflex. The gag occurs when an object or food touches the back 3/4 of the tongue. As sensorimotor skills increase and the child is ready to handle solid foods, the strong gag is no longer critical to survival. Between 4 and 6 months most typically developing babies reduce the strength of the gag through placing their fingers and toys further back in the mouth. Eventually the gag is only triggered when food is stuck on back 1/4 of the tongue. This is a gradual process which usually begins before the child is ready for lumpy foods.

Are there different types of MOUTH-TOYS?

There are two major categories of MOUTH-TOYS. 1. **Sensory Awareness Toys.** Some toys build simple awareness of a sensations in the mouth. For example the [Hand and Foot Teethers](#) and BounceBak have a smooth surface and shapes similar to body parts that the child has been exploring. Massagers such as the [Humbug](#) and Aquassager focus on a smooth surface and vibratory input.



2. **Sensory Discrimination Toys.** Other toys offer more complex sensory opportunities. The [Textured Fruit Toys](#) are firm with a wide variety of surface textures. Multiple contrasts are offered to the mouth as the child explores each of the three toys, and turns each toy in the mouth. A gentle vanilla scent is incorporated in the toy, giving the child experience with smell as well as shape and texture.



The Dessert Mouth Toys and Teethersaurus dinosaurs offer contrasts in surface texture, but their primary value lies in the contrast between a hard and softer-firm texture within the same toy.



The Exploration Beads feature separate objects strung together in a flexible ring. The circle of fruit beads includes soft, bright shapes of a banana, apple, orange, and grape.



Why are MOUTH-TOYS important for children with feeding problems?

Many children with feeding problems lacked the opportunity to develop generalized and discriminative mouthing skills when they were infants. A child may have difficulty getting the hands to the mouth or problems holding on to toys. Pain or discomfort in the mouth from suctioning, intubation, or oral surgery may result in the belief that any sensation in the mouth hurts and should be avoided. Lack of positive oral stimulation when a child is given a nasogastric feeding tube may contribute to hypersensitivity and oral sensory defensiveness. Tactile defensiveness in the hands and mouth may make it uncomfortable to bring toys to the mouth. When feeding utensils and food are offered, children may reject them because they are uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the sensations. Lumpy and textured foods provide great challenges. Sensory memories may remind children to take care of themselves, and they will avoid situations and sensations

associated with discomfort to the mouth. Children are more comfortable with spoons, cups, and food textures when they have had prior experience with the same sensations in toys.

How do I choose the best MOUTH-TOYS for a child?

A child's own body is the first toy. As children mouth their hands, they receive sensory feedback from both the hands and the mouth. Introduce MOUTH-TOYS after the child has had many opportunities to explore hands, fingers, feet, toys and other body parts with the mouth. The first MOUTH-TOYS should be easy to hold, and simple in shape and surface texture. These toys will build the child's general awareness of the oral sensations from the toy. After the child is comfortable with sensory awareness toys, you can introduce sensory discrimination toys. Select these according to the child's sensory needs and preferences, interests, and developmental level. Some children prefer softer toys; others do better with firmer ones. Some children become overwhelmed if the toy makes a sound. Others seek sound.

Are MOUTH-TOYS appropriate for older children?

Even adults have their MOUTH-TOYS. They chew on the end of a pen, chew gum, and smoke cigarettes. School-age children chew erasers, crunch hard candy, and hold pencils between their teeth. Many older children who lack experience with mouthing will not make a comfortable transition to textured foods without oral-sensory experience with non-food objects. Children who have sensory integrative problems often need oral stimulation for self-organization. Toys that are more "age appropriate" can be selected. Small Sesame Street™ or Disney™ figures are popular toys for children in preschool and kindergarten. Action figures are enjoyed by children in elementary school. Well-strung necklaces offer opportunities for casual oral manipulation. Exploration of shape and size in a set of spoons or cups can be helpful and interesting to teenagers.

Are MOUTH-TOYS safe for children who have teeth or a bite reflex?

Most MOUTH-TOYS were designed for infants and younger children without teeth and a strong bite. With supervision and common sense, toys can be used safely with older children. Toys used in the mouth should be carefully inspected every time they are given to a child. If chewing marks are present, pull that area of the toy to be sure that a piece is not getting weak or loose. Squeakers in toys that meet safety standards in infant toys may become dangerous if the toy is given to a child who likes to bite hard objects. No toy should be placed between the teeth of a child with a tonic bite reflex.

Suzanne Evans Morris, Ph.D.
Speech-Language Pathologist
New Visions
1124 Roberts Mountain Road
Faber, Virginia 22938
(434)361-2285

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