



**Humber Sensory
Processing Service**
Community Services for Children
aged 0-18 years



Advice for chewing

Chewing, especially on non-food items, can be a form of oral sensory seeking. The three senses involved in oral sensory processing are proprioception, touch, and taste. There are lots of reasons why someone might seek out things to chew on; but if they chew excessively, it might be a sign they are dysregulated. It can look like eating lots of crunchy snacks, biting fingernails or chewing clothing/stationery.

Why might chewing happen?

Up until two years old, an infant will explore their environment by putting objects in their mouth. Mouthing objects helps them to learn about shape, size, texture etc., as well as what is and isn't food. Sometimes a child might chew objects after this age, and it could be for any of the following reasons: -

- **A developmental delay** – if a child is diagnosed with a developmental delay, it is important to recognise that they may need more time to reach certain milestones. They may mouth objects beyond 24 months old because this is how they are learning.
- **Oral hygiene** – if a child has toothache, or pain in their mouth this may lead them to chew on objects. If possible, discuss any concerns with your child's dentist to rule out any dental problems.
- **PICA** – is a medical condition. A child may be diagnosed with PICA if they crave eating non-food items. Eating is different to chewing as it includes an attempt to swallow or ingest, and this could lead to a medical emergency. PICA can be caused by a deficiency or other underlying health condition, so it is important to discuss any concerns you may have with your child's GP as soon as possible.
- **Sensory processing differences** – chewing objects can be used as a self-regulation tool when over-whelmed or for extra input when under-stimulated. If your child is experiencing too much



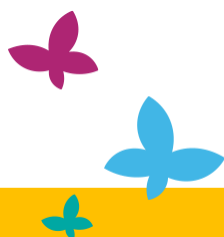
sensory input from the environment around them, they might chew or suck on objects to help calm down and self-soothe. If your child is restless, or has poor oral motor skills, they might chew on objects for additional sensory input to help them concentrate or develop awareness of their mouth.

Strategies for oral sensory seeking

- Trial re-directing your child to other proprioceptive activities that do not include chewing. If they are seeking proprioceptive input, this will satisfy the same sensory system (see the proprioceptive activities pdf for other ideas).
- If your child is chewing on unsafe items or household objects, try offering a “chew box”. This can be a box containing chewable toys and objects that are safe for your child. If the “chew box” is accessible they may start to access this independently instead of other unsafe items.
- If your child is chewing on non-food items during snack or mealtimes, this is a good opportunity to re-direct them with a crunchy snack they enjoy. This will also help them learn what is and isn't food and when to expect food.
- Any toys made for children under the age of two will be safe for a child to chew on as they are designed with this in mind.
- Give the child opportunities to enjoy sensory play activities including water play and sensory toys.
- Chewy jewellery – chewellery and chew buddies can be worn around the neck or wrist under clothing or school uniform.
- If your child is chewing through their clothes, try sewing old clothing together into chewable strips they can carry. Or cut the collar and cuffs from an old jumper for them to wear under their new clothes and chew instead.



- Allowing them to chew gum, only if it is age appropriate and suitable for your child.
- Drinking from a sports bottle or drinking through a straw, especially thicker drinks, like milkshakes, or cold drinks with ice.
- Playing games that involve tasks like blowing bubbles, blowing up balloons or puffing your cheeks out.
- Eating sugar free sour sweets or using a sour spray will help 'wake up' their oral receptors.



For more advice and strategies like this, you can visit our website:
sensoryprocessinghub.humber.nhs.uk

Or you can contact us with a question on the email address below:
hnf-tr.humbersensoryprocessingservice@nhs.net

