

Teacher Tools:

Seeking Oral Sensory Input and Consuming Non-Food Objects at School

Some students seek oral input and will mouth toys and writing utensils at school. Some students may even try to consume different non-food items (e.g., rocks, sand, playdoh, paint chips, glue, etc.). There are many drivers of this behaviour and school teams must be curious to understand the underlying need of the student. Students who engage in these behaviours require careful supervision around small toys and craft supplies (i.e. marbles, Lego), support, and modifications to their classroom environment for safety purposes (i.e. removal of specific non-foods).

Consider this...	Try this...	Examples
<p>Is the student eating enough food during nutrition breaks?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer preferred snacks - similar textures to the non-food items they are mouthing or consuming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limit distractions during meal times (i.e. screens) and check-in with the student (What did they eat? Does their body say they are full?) Offer preferred snacks similar to the non-food item: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Road Salt → Salty/Crunchy Crackers
<p>Does the student eat a variety of foods at school?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage families to consult with a medical professional to explore if a nutrient deficiency or other medical reasons are driving the consumption of non-food items. 	 <p>The medical professional may request bloodwork and suggest specific supplements if low iron or zinc is indicated.</p>
<p>What sensory input is the student trying to seek when putting non-food items in their mouth?</p> <hr/> <p>Are they trying to self-soothe? Are they looking for deep pressure to the jaw?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redirect the student from the non-food item and engage them in a more regulating activity with appropriate and preferred materials. Provide opportunities for calming deep pressure input to both the body and the mouth. Provide an alternate, safe chewing or mouthing activity. 	 <p>Chewelry, Vibrating Teething Toys, or Chewy/Crunchy Snacks</p>
<p>Does the student understand what items are not safe to put in their mouth?</p> <hr/> <p>Do they require visual communication supports to understand the difference?</p> <hr/> <p>Is oral exploration part of their developmental level?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create "taste-safe" sensory bins. Try using a social story with visuals to explain what can and cannot go into our mouths. 	 <p>Social Story</p> <p>Things like kidney beans, rice and cooked spaghetti can work great in your classroom sensory bin!</p> <p>I can put food in my mouth and chew it. Here are some foods.</p> <p>There are some things that are not foods. I should not put those in my mouth.</p>