

Up to about nine months of age babies explore everything with their mouths, however, by the end of the first year most children begin to investigate things by pushing, pulling, banging and otherwise manipulating objects. Some children with Autism Spectrum Disorders continue to use their mouth as a tool to explore their environment. Mouthing can become a source of sensory stimulation for children who have difficulty processing information from other sensory channels.

Some children with autism can get stuck in a pattern of mouthing behaviour which may persist for years. For hygienic reasons it is necessary to have a set of mouthing objects specifically set aside for each child.

To reduce mouthing using the sensory approach use the following strategies:

- If the child responds to visual cues (such as Compics or pictures), show them a Compic or picture of a mouth with a line through it. Always reward appropriate use of hands by tangible reward or praise.
- Do sensory things with his hands so that they become the main source of sensory information (touching shaving cream, brushes, finger paint, “feely” balls, satin, rice).
- When the child begins to mouth, quickly do things with his/her hands, applying different textures (sorbolene cream, scourers, brushes, buckets of split peas), deep pressure, (massage fingers and hands). Also try finger plays, e.g. ‘Round and Round the Garden’, and pushing and pulling heavy items such as doors, large balls, a trolley.
- Offer oral/facial sensory stimulation e.g. massaging around the mouth, and sucking and blowing tasks.

To reduce mouthing using a behavioural approach use the following strategies:

- Constantly take the child’s hands away from his/her mouth with a firm “No” or “Stop” or give a direction of what the child is to do with his/her hands e.g. “Hands down, Hands on lap”
- Use a small amount of “Stop and Grow” on fingers, or put gloves or mittens on hands
- If the child is eating playdough, try removing the salt or adding vinegar, or experiment with different flavourings or smells that the child may not like.
- If the above are unsuccessful it may be useful to consider trying the following:
- A piece of special plastic tubing (“chewy” available from the Autism Association), tied to the child’s clothing allows the child to engage in mouthing whilst at the same time freeing his hands for more appropriate activities. A damp facewisher can be used in the same way.
- Provide teething rings (some can be frozen) to suck and bite on.

A combination of the two approaches, sensory and behavioural, is recommended.