A Guide to Sensory Chews

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Sensory Chews – Why Do Children Chew?

Many Autistic children (and some adults) chew or bite on non-edible objects such as toys or pencils or they like to suck shirt sleeves or bite jumpers. This is a form of "Stimming" which is short for self stimulatory behaviour.

Chewing is just one form of stimming – others can be hand flapping, rocking or spinning – and these are often done to relieve anxiety, reduce fear and combat sensory overload. Most people stim to some degree – nail biting, hair twirling and foot tapping are all stimming behaviours.

Chewing non-edible objects is one of the more manageable forms of stimming and has little impact on others. The main issue is what to chew or bite safely without risk of choking, poisoning or just being unhygienic.

The mouth has the highest concentration of nerve endings in the body, which is why babies and toddlers put everything they can pick up in their mouths. Most children have grown out of this habit by the age of three however sensory seeking children will sometimes continue to bite & chew on objects to obtain proprioceptive input and sensory feedback.

Any item that can be picked up is fair game for mouthing – particularly small toys, pencils, shirt cuffs and buttons. Some children will prefer to mouth and lightly chew on things, whereas other will bite with substantial force that will easily break pencils and toys. Small tactile fidget toys, not designed for chewing, are a particular hazard and as parents we need to be constantly vigilant as many common items pose a threat as choking hazards. Other items maybe toxic or simply inappropriate to put in the mouth.

Sucking and biting jumpers and shirts is less hazardous but does lead to dirty sweaters and soggy cuffs.

There are some who advocate discouraging stimming on the grounds that it is often inappropriate. Another view is that, as long as it is safe, stimming is a useful outlet, reducing anxiety and allowing the autistic person to handle situations they find difficult or stressful.

There are various strategies and tools to modify chewing and biting. Chewy foods such as carrots and celery sticks can be used as a temporary chew. Specially designed chewy toys such as the Chewbuddy (made from medical grade material) also provide a safe alternative to chewing on fingers, cuffs, pencils and toys.

Choosing The Right Sensory Chew

Age appropriate

Make sure you select an age appropriate chew.

- For younger children (under 3) it is best to have a solid teether or something that mum can wear to maintain close supervision. The goal is to eliminate any choking hazard during chewing and oral exploration. The Chewbuddy Stickman is great for younger children and mild chewers because they encourage oral motor exploration with a soft texture. The Chewbuddy is soft enough not to damage teeth but strong enough to withstand biting from a mild to moderate chewer.
- Older children may prefer a wearable chew like the Chewbuddy Disc or Bangle which are more discreet and socially acceptable as well as being safe and effective.
- Teens, adults and more aggressive biters may enjoy heavier options like the Chewbuddy Super. Chewy pencil toppers are also a good option for older children – these are hollow and slide onto the end of a pen or pencil providing a safe outlet for chewing whilst writing or drawing.

Moderate or Heavy Chewer

As well as considering the age of the chewer it is also wise to consider their oral chewing needs.

- Moderate chewer / mouthing – a solid or hollow chew is appropriate. You could choose one with different textures or a chew with protruding parts so the user can explore it and gain sensory feedback. Examples are the Chewbuddy Stickman, Chewy Tubes or the Ark Grabber.

- Strong chewer / biter – some children (even young ones) can have a very strong need to bite and chew. They will bite hard on chew toys for a prolonged period of time and can quickly break chews designed for moderate chewing. Solid chews which do not have protruding parts (which can be a weak point) are recommended – for example the Chewbuddy Super.

Inspect regularly

Whether the child is younger or older, it is wise to inspect the chewy regularly for wear and tear. If cracks or weaknesses are noted, discard and replace the chewy. Chewies can last a long time but it depends on the biting habits of the chewer and the durability of the materials.

REMEMBER – no chewy is indestructible and eventually all chews will need to be replaced. Make sure you select an appropriate chew and supervise its usage. Inspect it before and after each usage. Some children and adults individuals with heavy oral needs will damage the chew. How long the chew will last depends on the chew used and the needs of the individual user.

Safety-Tested

Not all chewies are made the same. Be sure you have purchased a chewy from a reputable company that tests products for compliance with all applicable safety standards, including phthalates and BPA. When tubing is part of the chewy, medical grade tubing is best. Chewbuddy's are CE marked and made from medical grade material.

Wash regularly

Chewies should be washed with antibacterial soap and water after each use and left to air dry. Some chewies (such as the Chewbuddy) are dishwasher safe on the top rack – check the care instructions.

Quick release

A chewy necklace should be large enough to be easily removed or have a quick release or breakaway clasp that pops open easily. There are many styles of chewy necklaces and it really just depends on your child's preference as to which one you choose.

Remember that safety is of the utmost importance and there is no protection like a watchful parent!