



Oral Desensitisation

What is the aim?

Some Children do not like being touched around their head and mouth. These responses need to be reduced so that oral experiences (mouthing toys and feeding) are enjoyable. Oral desensitisation activities aim to provide your child with positive oral and feeding input and reduce negative experiences.

What can you do?

These activities should be done regularly, either just prior to, or during a feed so that your child associates positive touch with feeding. Ideally, you want to expose your child to many short sessions (10-15 minutes) throughout the day, rather than one long daily session.

Firm Touch/Massage (McCurtin, 1997; Wolf & Glass, 1992)

- Desensitisation activities should be done in a calm environment. Softly talking to your child throughout these exercises can have a calming effect and reduce stress.
- Use slow, gentle yet firm strokes, using either small strokes or circular movements. Move slowly between each step- don't rush it! The massage should be given to both the left and right sides at the same time, as your child lies on their back.
- Begin by massaging your child's legs, torso and arms.
- Next, slowly move up your child's neck, continuing on to the back of the head. Gradually move the massage to your child's forehead
- If your child is showing no signs of stress or anxiety, continue down their cheeks and towards the corners of their mouth.
- Gently circle your child's lips with your index finger.
- Use your little finger to rub the outside of your child's lower & upper gums. Start at the front of the mouth and work your way backwards.
- Gradually, move into the mouth. Insert the finger (with your nail towards the tongue) and start rubbing the top of the mouth and slowly move further into the mouth towards the soft palate.

Note: this activity can be repeated with a range of textures and tools, such as dummies, textured materials (i.e. velvet), teething toys, toothbrush trainers or vibrating toys/toothbrushes (McCurtin, 1997).

Vibration (McCurtin, 1997; Swigert, 1998, Wolf & Glass, 1992)

- Vibration can be used, following the same steps as the firm touch/massage section.
- If the vibration stimulus is too strong, your child may find it overwhelming, therefore it may be necessary to grade the level of vibration.
- Some toys/toothbrushes have different levels of vibration intensity. However, if your toy/toothbrush only has one vibration level, older batteries can be used to produce a weaker stimulus. Initially, your child may be more comfortable with old batteries that produce a weaker vibration in comparison to new batteries producing a much stronger vibration.



When do I know if my child is uncomfortable or not coping?

Children use different ways to express that they are not coping with different situations (Wolf & Glass, 1992). Some of the signs are:

- Crying
- Head turning
- Grimacing
- Gagging
- Vomiting

Also watch for changes in your child's colour or breathing pattern.

If your child is not coping, revisit the previous level of activity he/she tolerated (Wolf & Glass, 1992; Starr, 2006). For example, if your child begins to gag when you move your finger to the top of their mouth, stop and return to massaging their gums. After a little while, you can try to progress to the top of the mouth again.

Products:

- *The Therapy bookshop* has lots of items that can be used including a gum massager, teething toys and a 'NUK trainer toothbrush'. Click onto 'Oral motor toys' on the menu found on the left hand side. Then make your selection: <http://www.therapybookshop.com/>
- *Theraproducts* is a website that contains many items including low-vibration toys and 'NUK trainer toothbrushes'. These can be found by clicking 'oral motor' on the menu on the left hand side. Then select 'sensory' or 'z-vibes': http://www.theraproducts.com/index.php?main_page=categories
- The *Baby Ant* website contains many different dummies to purchase among other food utensils: <http://www.babyant.com/feeding.html>
- *Tommee Tippee* products (including dummies and toothbrush trainers) can be bought at different outlets. Their product range can be found at: <http://www.tommeetippee.com.au/category.asp?pk=1>
- 'Gumdrop pacifiers' are a type of dummy that allows you to put your finger through the teat, so you can manipulate it around your child's mouth. You can purchase these over the internet from: <http://www.gumdroppacifiers.com/store/>

References:

- McCurtin, A. (1997). *The manual of paediatric feeding practice*. Oxon: Winslow.
- Starr, S. (2006). Management of paediatric feeding problems. In J. Cichero & B. Murdoch (Eds.), *Dysphagia: Foundation, theory and practice*. (pp. 392-465). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Swigert, N.B. (1998). *The source for pediatric dysphagia*. East Moline: Lingui Systems.
- Wolf, L., & Glass R. (1992). *Feeding & Swallowing disorders in Infancy: Assessment and Management*. Arizona: Therapy Skill Builders.