

Oral Motor Development: A Parent's Guide



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What are Oral Motor Skills

Oral motor skills refer to the coordination and movement of the muscles in the mouth, lips, tongue, and jaw. These skills are crucial for various functions such as eating, drinking, speaking, and swallowing. They involve precise control and coordination of these muscles to perform tasks like forming sounds during speech, manipulating food in the mouth, and maintaining proper oral hygiene.



How Do Children Develop Oral Motor Skills

Children develop oral motor skills through a series of stages, beginning from birth and continuing into early childhood. Throughout these stages, children learn and refine their oral motor skills through exploration, practice, and imitation.

Here's a general overview of how these skills typically develop:

Birth to 6 Months: Infants begin developing basic oral motor skills shortly after birth. During this stage, they primarily engage in sucking and swallowing reflexes to breastfeed or bottle-feed. They also start to explore their mouths with their tongues and lips, laying the foundation for later oral motor development.

6 to 12 Months: Babies start to transition from reflexive sucking to voluntary sucking motions. They explore different textures and consistencies of food as they begin to transition to solid foods. They also engage in mouthing behaviours, where they explore objects by putting them in their mouths.

12 to 24 Months: Toddlers continue to refine their oral motor skills during this stage. They develop the ability to chew more efficiently and coordinate their tongue movements to manipulate food in their mouths. They also begin to imitate simple speech sounds and gestures.

2 to 3 Years: As children approach preschool age, their oral motor skills become more refined. They develop clearer speech patterns and can produce a wider range of speech sounds. They also improve their ability to chew a variety of foods and manage more complex food textures.

3 to 6 Years: By preschool and early school age, children's oral motor skills continue to develop rapidly. They refine their articulation of speech sounds, allowing for clearer and more intelligible speech. They also gain better control over their tongue movements, which helps with eating, drinking, and oral hygiene tasks.



Why Oral Motor Development is Important in Child Development

Speech and Language Development: Strong oral motor skills are essential for the development of speech and language. Children need to be able to control the movements of their lips, tongue, and jaw to produce clear speech sounds and form words. Without adequate oral motor skills, children may struggle with speech clarity and articulation, which can impact their ability to communicate effectively.

Feeding and Swallowing Skills: Oral motor skills are essential for safe and efficient feeding and swallowing. Children need to be able to manipulate food in their mouths, chew it into a manageable consistency, and coordinate swallowing without choking or aspirating food or liquids. Difficulties with oral motor skills can lead to feeding difficulties, such as gagging, choking, or difficulty transitioning to solid foods.

Nutrition and Growth: Proper oral motor development supports healthy eating habits and nutrition in young children. When children can effectively chew and swallow a variety of foods, they are more likely to consume a balanced diet rich in essential nutrients. This, in turn, supports optimal growth and development during childhood.

Oral Hygiene: Oral motor skills also play a role in maintaining good oral hygiene. Children need to be able to coordinate movements to brush their teeth, floss, and rinse their mouths effectively. Strong oral motor skills enable children to perform these tasks independently, promoting oral health and preventing dental issues such as cavities and gum disease.

Social Interaction: Clear speech and effective communication are essential for social interaction and building relationships. Children with well-developed oral motor skills are better able to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs verbally, which enhances their ability to engage with peers, teachers, and caregivers.

Characteristics of Delayed or Unacquired Oral Motor Skills in Young Children:

- Difficulty articulating speech sounds correctly, leading to unclear speech or speech distortions.
- Limited ability to chew food thoroughly, resulting in difficulty with managing textures and consistencies.
- Poor coordination of tongue movements, leading to challenges in manipulating food in the mouth.
- Reduced oral sensory awareness, resulting in aversions to certain tastes, textures, or temperatures of food.
- Frequent gagging or choking episodes during feeding or swallowing.
- Messy or inefficient eating habits, such as spitting out food or excessive drooling.
- Limited range of motion or strength in facial muscles, impacting facial expressions and oral movements.
- Difficulty with lip closure or maintaining lip tension, affecting speech production and oral hygiene tasks.
- Prolonged feeding times due to inefficient chewing or swallowing patterns.

- Avoidance of oral hygiene routines or resistance to toothbrushing and flossing.
- Preference for soft or pureed foods over solid textures.
Inconsistent ability to control saliva, resulting in drooling or excessive drool production.
Reduced oral exploration or mouthing behaviours compared to peers.
- Limited variety in vocalisations or vocal play, indicating restricted oral motor abilities.
- Frustration or distress during mealtimes or oral hygiene routines.
- Difficulty imitating oral motor movements or following oral motor instructions.
- Lack of progress in oral motor skills despite age-appropriate interventions or therapy.
- Oral habits such as thumb sucking or lip biting that persist beyond developmental stages.
- Inadequate progression in speech and language milestones compared to peers.
- Social or emotional impacts, such as withdrawal or frustration during social interactions involving eating or speaking.

Assessment and Management of Oral Motor Development

Oral motor development is typically assessed by professionals such as Speech Pathologists, Paediatricians, or Occupational Therapists.

In young children, assessment often involves observation of oral motor skills during various activities such as feeding, speaking, and oral hygiene routines. Professionals may also use standardised assessment tools to evaluate specific aspects of oral motor function, such as speech sound production, chewing and swallowing abilities, and oral sensory awareness. Additionally, professionals may gather information from parents or caregivers about the child's feeding habits, speech development, and any concerns they have noticed.



Strategies to Support Children's Oral Motor Development

Provide Opportunities for Oral Exploration: Offer a variety of age-appropriate toys, objects, and materials that encourage oral exploration, such as teething toys, textured teethers, and soft chewy toys. Allow your child to explore these items safely and independently to stimulate their oral motor skills.

Incorporate Sensory Activities: Plan sensory-rich activities that involve different textures, tastes, and consistencies, such as finger painting with edible materials, playing with food-safe sensory bins, or exploring textured fabrics. These activities engage children's oral muscles and provide valuable sensory input.

Offer Oral Motor Toys and Tools: Provide access to oral motor toys and tools designed to support oral motor development, such as chewy tubes, oral motor chewelry, and vibrating oral massagers. These tools can help strengthen oral muscles and improve oral motor coordination.

Encourage Oral Motor Exercises: Incorporate fun oral motor exercises and activities into daily routines, such as blowing bubbles, whistling, and making funny faces. These activities help children develop lip, tongue, and jaw strength while promoting oral motor coordination.

Model Correct Speech Sounds: Model clear speech sounds and language patterns during conversations. Encourage your child to imitate sounds, words, and sentences, providing positive reinforcement and feedback to support their speech development.

Facilitate Oral Hygiene Routines: Teach and reinforce good oral hygiene practices, such as toothbrushing, flossing, and rinsing, during daily routines. Provide visual supports, demonstrations, and hands-on practice to help your child learn proper oral care techniques.



Collaborate with Specialists: Work closely with Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, and other specialists who can develop targeted intervention plans.

Conclusion:

Early detection and intervention are critical in supporting children with oral motor difficulties. If you have any concerns about your child's oral motor development, please reach out to the Inspire AHEG team to find out how we can assist you.

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