

Oral Experiences: Sensory Activities for Children

Awakening the senses when your child is not ready to eat

Your child may not be ready to eat by mouth, especially if they are learning to feed safely. While your child's feeding skills are developing, you can help them to become comfortable with food and feeding using touch and other sensory activities that are important in learning to eat. When your child experiences different and enjoyable sensations around the mouth and nose, they begin to build the foundation for feeding by mouth. Talk to your healthcare provider about which of these ideas would be best for your child.

Pick a time

- Pick a time when you can give your child your full attention.
- Before you begin sensory activities with your child, check in to see if he or she is ready. Your child is ready to explore new sensations when awake, calm, breathing comfortably, and engaged with you.



Set up the experience






- Create a calm environment. Take away distractions, turn off screens or other noise and turn down bright lights.
- Start by letting your child know what is going to happen. Talk about what you will be doing and show your child what you are planning to use (a cloth, your fingers) to help them get ready.

Offer touch and other sensory activities based on your child's level of comfort

- As you introduce a new activity, watch your child's response carefully to see if he or she is enjoying the experience.
- If your child appears comfortable and seems to be enjoying it, keep going.
- If your child appears uncomfortable, wait a moment, adjust the activity, or take a step back in what you're offering.
- If your child does not seem ready to keep going, stop. Let them know it is okay to stop.
- Finish with an activity you know your child likes.
- Your healthcare team can work with you to help you understand your child's cues and help choose experiences that your child enjoys.






What is your child showing you?

Signs of comfort	Signs of discomfort
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• turning towards you• leaning in• licking lips• smiling• opening their mouth• moving their mouth towards you• reaching towards you   	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• turning away• pushing or pulling away• arching• frowning• closing the lips• wide eyes or staring off• breathing hard• becoming red in the face• fussing or crying• yelling• saying “no” or “stop”• gagging or vomiting  

As you get closer to the mouth and nose, more of their senses are turned on. Help your child get used to new or different experiences by moving slowly. Ensure your child is in control, follow their lead and adjust your movements (as described on the previous page).

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Steps	For babies	For older children
Get ready	Bundle your baby in a light blanket with their hands unwrapped. 	Have your child sitting comfortably facing you. Provide supports for their feet and back if needed.
Show	Show your child what you plan to use for the touch experiences (your hand, cloth, etc.) and wait for a response.	
Smell	New babies respond best to familiar smells. Hold a cloth with a drop of your milk on it or an item of clothing you've worn close to your baby's face so they can smell it. As your baby gets more familiar with these smells, you can introduce new smells.	Introduce your child to the smell of a variety of foods. Watch their response and bring smells closer if they appear comfortable.
Whole body	Help your baby to wake up their body with gentle movements. Babies usually prefer the gentle consistent pressure of a whole hand.  Repeated tickling can sometimes be upsetting. Watch your baby's response and see what they like.	Every child explores their environment differently. Some children enjoy deep pressure (such as a weighted toy), some enjoy holding and squeezing things. What would help your child get ready to explore with their senses?
Arms, Legs and Back	Start from the outside of the body (hands and feet) and move inwards (belly, chest, shoulders). Use gentle strokes to slowly move up the body.	Start to introduce food play. (See "Food Play" handout on the PEAS website (peas.ahs.ca) Offer your child foods to touch and hold. 
Head and Face	Gently stroke the top of the head then the eyebrows, the sides of the jaw, and the cheeks.	As your child brings foods closer to the face and mouth, more of the senses are turned on.
Mouth	Using either a soother or the knuckle of your clean hand, touch it to your child's lips. They may move their lips against it, lick it, or open their mouth to latch. Allow them to take the soother or knuckle into their mouth in their own time.	Touch a spoon or cup to parts of your face. Wait to see if your child wants to do the same. Show your child how you explore foods by touching them to your cheeks, chin, and lips. Your child may try the same thing or do something different.

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call Health Link at **811**.

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