

Exploratory Play

Exploring through mouthing, handling and observing

All babies need to explore objects through mouthing, licking, tasting, handling and observing, to learn what to do with different objects. Through this exploration, the child is able to develop an understanding of the object by use. This important stage of learning starts around 6 months and continues typically up to 18 months and for some children much longer.

Babies and young child need to explore a range of real objects. It is an important step in learning language. The child needs to know how it feels, what you can and cannot do with it, what it is made of, what it is associated with, and in time, the word. Children with special education needs who are not really engaging in pretend play or using objects appropriately, will need longer to explore in this way and importantly need to have access to a collection of everyday things as well as toys.



Exploratory Play using real objects

Practitioners and parents/carers may well have to actively teach exploration of objects in real situations

- Take time to provide opportunities for your child to explore real things indoors and outside in everyday situations
- Observe the child mouthing/handling the objects and show him/her how to use them
- Provide additional time to encourage the child to explore objects in real situations e.g. a spare spoon as he/she feeds; a spare cup as he/she drinks; a spare shoe as he/she dresses. Show the child how to use each object appropriately

- Use single words and sounds to accompany the playful modelling
- Later hand objects to the child just after the real situation, helping the child to make the connections between the actions, objects and words
- Create a range of baskets and boxes with real things inside ready for the child to explore as they empty out and fill again

Mouthing toys to meet oral sensory needs

Babies and young children need to explore their surroundings using their mouths – licking, chewing and tasting. This can provide a calming, self-regulatory function too. Babies are often offered soothers and bottles when they are upset.

Some of our young children with special educational needs, need to continue to meet oral sensory needs and to explore and learn in this way. Providing opportunities to do so is important for their development and emotional well-being. Guiding older toddlers to explore more through their hands will have to be planned for and practised see sensory play Ideas here [Play Skills and Activities \(eani.org.uk\)](http://eani.org.uk)

Understanding why the child needs to chew and explore orally will be important to then providing the right resources to meet the need. As children get older there is concern regarding hygiene and safety. Children who need to chew on objects need the extra sensory input to help them self-regulate. Sometimes children may chew/mouth/taste objects because:

- They are anxious
- They are bored
- They are trying to focus
- Seeking deep pressure input

Things to try

1. Meeting proprioceptive needs – push and pull, squeeze and press activities
2. Chewies and Chewelry
3. Chewy and crunchy food
4. Using straws with thick milkshakes/yoghurts
5. Vibration toothbrushes
6. Oral games – bubbles, blow football & pin wheels

