

The Lunch Box as a Self-Regulation Tool

Self-regulation means managing energy states and matching them to the demands of the situation. We need to manage our energy in socially expected ways in order to learn, to build relationships and to maintain wellbeing. Self-regulation involves dealing effectively with the stressors we encounter both internally and externally.

Infants do not start out being able to self-regulate. During infancy regulation is mostly managed by caring and responsive adults. They co-regulate the baby by detecting signs of hunger, pain, discomfort and fear and by making adjustments that calm the baby. However, babies are equipped with their own self-regulation tools – their hands and mouths - and they use these as the first steps on the road to self-regulation. Sucking and mouthing are very powerful self-regulators because they help infants calm themselves, organise their bodies, focus their eyes and normalise their breathing.

Oral input continues to be used as a strategy for self-regulation as infants develop into toddlers. In the early childhood years there is a growth spurt in the development of self-regulation. Children are more able to articulate their needs, their preferences and dislikes. They learn to control impulses. Adults help to support these emerging self-regulation skills by providing children with acceptable oral input.

As in infancy, the mouth, hands and various objects are readily available for young children to practice self-management. Children may suck their thumbs, mouth favourite objects or chew on pieces of material in order to feel calm. Others may drink from bottles or cups to help to soothe themselves. Some children have more difficulty with regulation and may use more intense inputs to help regulate themselves, such as biting, clenching, chewing excessively on objects and overstuffing their mouths. If adults become aware of the situations in which children use these inputs, they can get clues about circumstances that children find demanding and energy consuming. This insight gives adults an opportunity to

reinterpret certain behaviours as a child's attempt to self-regulate. Adults can help to coregulate the child by offering replacement inputs.

As children grow they continue to use oral inputs to help with self-management and regulation. The tools they use become increasingly personalised and discrete. Frequently children seek out oral input from clothing that they are wearing such as laces, cuffs and collars. Some use their hands or objects like pens or pencils in and around the mouth and lips. Oral input is a ubiquitous tool, used throughout the lifespan, to help regulate internal states so we can remain calm and focused.

Children with special needs benefit from learning how to use oral tools intentionally to increase their capacity to self-regulate. We can introduce nutritive and non-nutritive oral inputs to teach children to identify how it feels to be calm, focused and ready to engage with others. For example, an adult might say: *It looks as if you are feeling tired after reading. Would you like a long drink of water to get your body awake for writing? or It looks as if you are very excited after playing outside. Would you like to chew some cubes of cheese to help your body calm down so you can listen to the story?* As children become aware of how their bodies feel after this type of co-regulation they can start to make choices about which oral inputs might best help them to manage specific energy states.

Oral inputs that help children **calm** themselves tend to be those that provide deep, rhythmical pressure through the jaw, such as chewing, sucking and blowing.



In the lunch box it is helpful to provide:

- Dried fruit
- Jerky
- Cheese
- Fruit purees, such as apple sauce
- Thick liquids such as milkshakes and fruit nectars
- Drinks in sports-style bottles or with straws
- Warm foods

Non-nutritive items might include:

- Straws that can be wide, silly, long and thin
- “Chewlery” - wearable jewellery that is safe to chew

- Gum for older students (following explicit gum rules¹). Strong flavoured gums or several pieces at a time add sensory input.
- Chewable pencil toppers

Oral inputs that help children who are under-responsive to be **alert** to their environments tend to be those things that are cold or chilled, crunchy, textured or have strong or sour flavours.



In the lunch box it is helpful to provide:

- Partially frozen drinks or frozen yogurt tubes
- Frozen bananas
- Dried cereal
- Granola bars
- Fresh fruit such as lemon, grapefruit, mandarin orange, pomelo, etc.
- Fresh vegetables such as carrots, celery, peppers, etc.
- Crackers, pretzels, bread sticks and croutons
- Bagels
- Popcorn (for older students, with supervision in case of choking)
- Pickles

Non-nutritive items might include:

- Textured “Chewlery” or textured cutlery
- Textured pencil toppers
- Objects that vibrate such as vibrating pens, pencil tops, toothbrushes or facial massagers
- Ice chips

Providing children with access to socially acceptable oral inputs throughout the day gives them opportunities to meet their needs to self-regulate. We can assist children to be intentional in their choices by helping them to identify which foods or items to select depending on their energy. Encouraging children to reflect upon

¹ Gum Rules at School: Gum should be used **Safely, Silently** and out of **Sight**. Keep the gum inside your mouth and do not pull the gum with your hands. Keep your mouth closed and quiet while chewing. Do not blow bubbles. Keep the gum wrapper and when the gum is finished, place the chewed gum in the wrapper and throw it in the waste basket.

how they feel after the oral input can help them to understand the connection between oral input and regulation.

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