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To Chew...Or Not To Chew

Questions abound about chewing. Parents and teachers want to know why elementary children seem to chew everything in sight, from pencils and pen tops to shirt cuffs and paper. Occupational Therapists want to know how long a child should chew, and what sort of device we should give them to chew on. Dentists worry about the degree of clenching and grinding they see in today's children, and the resulting wearing down of molars and increased muscle spasm. So why do children chew? What we do know is that today's children are moving and exercising less...way less, and their sedentary lifestyle is causing a multitude of problems. Could there be a connection between not moving and chewing?

Think of how we lived 100 years ago. We were physical, all the time... chopping wood, digging in fields, hauling water. We had to move to survive. Now (which is not very long from an evolutionary perspective) we don't need to move. From the time we are an infant to the time we die, technology has virtually eliminated the need to move. Babies sleep on their backs, reducing the need to push their bodies up to see the world, and they are encased in protective devices that greatly limit movement. Safety measures have dramatically changed the way children play. Playground equipment of the past (high swings, merry-go-rounds, jungle gyms) are gone. Climbing trees, building forts, playing "cops and robbers" has been replaced with the virtual reality of video games. Why go to the zoo, play a sport, make up a pretend game, or even play with your pets, when you can do all of this on the computer? Food of choice has also changed. We now eat processed, easy to chew food...again reducing the amount of work or exercise the jaw has to do to keep us fed.

The effects of this sedentary lifestyle on our children are vast and numerous: delays in neurological development, decreased ability to attend and complete tasks, attachment disorders and emotional disconnection from friends and family to name a few. Another, less obvious result of not moving is a huge increase in chewing... on everything!

The Temporal Mandibular joint and muscle are one of the strongest in the body... just ask anyone who's been bit! If a child's body needs to move, if their biological body is calling out for some heavy work and exercise, but they are sitting at a desk or watching TV, they will chew. Chewing helps release pent up body energy, which is necessary to feel calm, grounded and in the Zone to learn. But too much of a good thing isn't good either! As Dr. Carl Amberg a dentist says, "Too much chewing (or clenching and grinding) can cause increased tonicity of the jaw muscles and wearing down of the teeth." Dr. Amberg concluded that it would be better for children who need to chew to do physical work or play instead, as this is what their body is actually craving. If a child does need to chew, for example to stay seated or focused in class, then they should just chew for short durations, and on an object with high resistance (chewy pencil topper, chewy bracelet).

A more effective approach to a chewing problem is to provide the child with increased opportunities for high resistive movement e.g. biking up hill, playing tug-of-war, climbing trees, lifting and carrying heavy blocks, crates, wood. While seated at a desk, kids who like to chew could instead be pulling on a bike inner tube attached to their desk or chair, do hand or chair push-ups, or do the “back-to-back, arm-loop-pull” with their neighbor. Reducing TV and video game use is crucial! A chewer needs to move!!!

So... whenever you see a child chewing remember – he/she is trying to get in the Zone to learn – but just needs to get Move’in instead!

Biography

Cris Rowan has been an Occupational Therapist for 20 years, working in schools for the past 8 years. Cris has recently developed two new educational programs Zone’in and Move’in for use in schools and at home. Zone’in is derived from Sensory Integration theory, and helps children get their energy *Zone’in to Learn*. Move’in is based on Fine Motor Development theory and is designed to help children print and read by taking them on a *Printing Adventure*. You can learn more about these programs at www.zonein.ca, or email Cris at info@zonein.ca.