



# Promoting Oral Motor Skills at Home

2.3.5

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If your child experiences oral motor difficulties, you may see some or all of the following problems: drooling, poor lip closure, mouth breathing, inability to suck a straw or blow out candles, chewing with mouth open, or the tongue protruding outside of the mouth. If your child has developed speech, you may be hearing poor articulation of sounds, a nasal quality to the voice, or speech that sounds slushy or slurry.

The oral structures (lips, tongue, jaw, and throat) are made up of many muscles that must work closely together to produce clear, well-articulated speech and safe swallowing. If weakness or poor muscle coordination exists, the exercises listed below can improve strength and coordination. Much like exercising to keep our bodies fit, the oral structures can also "work out" to become stronger and more coordinated.

You and your children probably work closely with a speech-language pathologist. In addition, it is important to continue practice at home to help your child more quickly learn to control the oral structures and increase muscle strength.

There are two types of exercises you can do with your child. Active exercises involve your child performing oral movements. Passive exercises are exercises that you do for or to the child.

Passive exercises work well with infants who are too young to follow directions. They can be used as warm-up exercises to "wake up" muscles before you begin active exercises. Also, if your child has been diagnosed as "orally defensive" (very sensitive to touch), these exercises can help to desensitize the child's mouth area to touch and various textures.

## Passive Exercises

- Stimulate the outside of the lips, chin, and cheeks with various textures such as cotton swabs, a toothbrush, a small vibrator, a warm or cold cloth, or a cold spoon (do not use ice because it is numbing). Lightly touch or rub the area to be stimulated.
- Tap firmly on closed lips with two fingers.
- Rub firmly downward on cheeks toward lips and upward from chin to lips.

- Use an index finger and thumb on the corners of the mouth and stretch them outward, then release.
- Stimulate the inside of the cheek and gums with a soft toothbrush or cotton swab, rubbing gently.
- Rub downward firmly on the upper lip and upward firmly on the lower lip.
- Push down firmly on the tongue with a toothbrush or frozen-pop stick several times. Then tickle the roof of the mouth. Push down on the tongue several times.
- Alternate placing a small amount of food on the upper lip, the lower lip, and the roof of the mouth; then have the child reach for it and lick it off. Use foods of different temperatures. For example, applesauce can be warmed or refrigerated so that the child can "feel" it better.
- Hold an ice cream cone or frozen juice pop just outside the mouth and let the child lick it several times.

Your child may not be able to perform these last two exercises until later in his development.

## Other Exercises Specific to Swallowing and Eating

- Rub firmly from the chin down along the throat to encourage swallowing.
- Feed the child with your finger to encourage chewing and biting.
- Place food on alternate sides of the mouth to encourage chewing.

## Active Exercises

Children usually develop the ability to do these active exercises between the ages of 18 months and three years. Use language your child can understand when giving directions to do these exercises. It is helpful to use a mirror so your child can see the mouth and the way it is supposed to move. Set a big mirror on a table or use the one in the bathroom so you can be side by side with your child and watch each other making "funny faces." Do each exercise ten times and at least two to three times per day. If your child is unable to perform a certain movement, try

it once or twice, then move onto the next exercise so as not to discourage your child. You can use your hand to help guide the tongue or lips into the proper position. Make these exercises fun for your child, not a frustration.

- Open your mouth as wide as you can, hold for 3 seconds, then close it.
- Pucker your lips like a kiss, and push them forward as far as you can.
- Make a big smile and hold it for 3 seconds. Then relax.
- Now alternate **Smile** and **Pucker**.
- Purse lips together hard. Hold for 3 seconds.
- Puff up your cheeks by blowing with your mouth closed. Hold for 2 or 3 seconds. Try to make a tight seal so air doesn't escape.
- Stick out your tongue. Make sure that you push it out in the middle of your mouth, in line with the tip of your nose.
- Try to touch your chin, then your nose, with the tip of your tongue. (To help guide the tongue, you can use jelly, peanut butter, or other food on the upper and lower lip as a guide to the target.) Repeat this exercise with the corners of the mouth.

- Lick your lips in a circle. Start in one direction, then switch and go the other way.
- Put a spoon or tongue depressor against your lips and push hard against it with the tip of your tongue. Push for 3 seconds, then relax. Push again. Relax.
- Drink liquids through a straw to improve lip strength. (Check with your speech-language pathologist if swallowing problems are also present.)
- Sucking on frozen juice pops or lollipops is good for strengthening.
- Practice whistling.
- Play "blowing games" with feathers, cotton, plastic-foam chips, and bubbles.

### **Summary**

The rates at which children show improvement vary widely. Progress depends on the severity of the problem, the nature of the disorder, and the amount of time you are able to invest in practice. The key is to be patient and work at a speed that suits your child's needs. You may even find that your child enjoys doing these exercises and will practice without you! Remember, exercising can be fun.