



Supporting Children Who Overfill Their Mouth During Mealtime

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Have you ever seen your child shovel too much of their favorite food into their mouth, until it's falling out or too hard to swallow? This behavior, called overstuffing, can occur occasionally, especially with preferred foods. However, if it happens frequently, it may indicate difficulty with pacing during feeding or could be sensory-based.

Overstuffing can look like taking very large bites, cramming multiple bites at once, or holding food in the cheeks. It is often a combination of sensory and motor factors. Some children seek strong oral input and prefer big, crunchy bites, while others have decreased oral awareness and do not recognize how much food is already in their mouth. Factors such as fatigue, immature chewing skills, impulsivity, and rushing can further contribute.

Children with decreased oral awareness may overstuff because larger amounts of food provide increased sensory input to help them register where the food is in their mouth. Children who seek deep pressure input may be especially likely to demonstrate this pattern. While this may meet a sensory need, it can impact safe chewing and swallowing and interfere with the development of efficient oral motor skills.

Goals of this program:

to improve oral awareness, support pacing, and promote safe, efficient eating.

Slow it down, make it safe, make it successful.

Before Meals (Prepare the Body and Mouth):

Providing input before meals can help increase awareness and reduce the need to overstuff.

- Offer deep pressure activities such as bear hugs, pushing/pulling games, or wall push-ups
- Use oral input like blowing bubbles, blowing whistles, or drinking thick liquids (e.g., smoothies through a straw)
- Offer naturally crunchy foods (e.g., carrot sticks, apple slices, beef jerky) 2-3 minutes before meals
- Cold drinks, such as ice water, can also increase oral alertness
- Use a vibrating toothbrush along the gums, cheeks, tongue, and palate (as tolerated)
- A more targeted option includes oral motor tools such as the [ARK Z-Vibe](#) or similar vibrating tools, which provide gentle vibration to the lips, tongue, cheeks, and jaw to improve oral registration
- Additional tools such as [TalkTools Jigglers](#), [vibrating teethers](#), or chewy vibrating toys can provide combined tactile and vibratory input to support oral awareness and meet sensory needs

Always follow your child's cues and tolerance when providing oral input.

During Meals (Build Awareness and Pacing):

- Right-size portions: Offer small amounts of food at a time and refill as needed. Cut tougher foods into small, manageable pieces
- Match utensils to the goal: Use child-sized or shallow utensils to naturally limit bite size and reduce large scoops
- Set a steady pace: Use a simple rhythm such as “bite, chew, sip, pause.” Encourage placing utensils down between bites to prevent overloading
- Make it playful: Use phrases like “one bite at a time” or games such as “one car in the car wash.” Have your child show an “empty car wash” by opening their mouth after swallowing
- Model and narrate: Demonstrate taking small bites, chewing fully, and swallowing. Verbally describe the process to increase understanding
- Teach a “mouth check”: Prompt “all clear” before the next bite. Have the child say “ahh” or use a mirror to check for remaining food
- Use visual supports: A mirror, simple visual cue card, or timer can help reinforce pacing
- Offer alerting foods during meals: Include crunchy, cold, or sour foods (e.g., raw vegetables, cold items) to increase sensory input
- Build chewing skills: Start with easier textures and gradually increase difficulty. Place food on side molars to encourage rotary chewing
- Try alternative utensils: For older children, toothpicks (with supervision) or chopsticks can encourage slower, more controlled eating

Positioning Matters:

Proper posture can improve chewing and swallowing efficiency:

- Feet supported
- Hips and knees at approximately 90 degrees
- Table at about belly-button height

After Meals (Reinforce Awareness):

- Offer drinks through a straw for additional oral input
- Provide chewy/resistive snacks if continued sensory seeking is observed
- Briefly talk about how their mouth felt during the meal to build awareness over time

When to Seek Additional Support:

Consider consulting an occupational therapist or speech-language pathologist if the above mentioned is not working and you notice:

- Frequent gagging or coughing
- Holding (pocketing) food in the cheeks for extended periods
- Difficulty managing mixed textures
- Mealtimes that remain stressful despite using these strategies

A feeding specialist can assess oral sensory needs, chewing patterns, and swallowing safety, and provide individualized strategies to support your child.

With consistency, these strategies can help improve oral awareness, reduce overstuffing, and support safe, successful mealtimes.