

## Techniques to Address Self-Stimulation

*By Joann Fleckenstein, M.S., OTR/L*

As I sit in an early morning meeting, I find myself struggling to stay awake and focused. I begin tapping my toes under the table and sipping my coffee. During a break, I walk around the hall to try to wake myself up and opt to chew some spearmint bubble gum. By stimulating my senses, I was able to pay attention to the details of the meeting and provide appropriate feedback.

Similarly, many people with neurological differences use **self-stimulation** to meet a sensory need or to maintain their sensory and emotional **regulation**. Some may pick at their fingers while others may need to move often in order to attend to a task. When attempts to self-regulate through stimulation become disruptive to others, the impulse can be to stop the behavior altogether. However, in contrast, we must ask why the person needs to self-stimulate. For example, a person who chews on her clothing or puts non-food objects in her mouth may be seeking a mouth or jaw input, and could benefit from using a piece of chewable jewelry, or “chewelry.”

For others, meeting their sensory needs can be concerning or even dangerous, banging their heads or hitting others as a result of an unmet sensory need or emotional **dysregulation**. In these cases, a more in-depth assessment of the reasons behind this behavior is essential for developing appropriate solutions.

An occupational therapist with experience in sensory integration can help identify preferences and activities to meet sensory needs. Always work with your provider directly to ensure that behavior and sensory solutions are tailored to your child’s individual needs.

To learn more about occupational therapy, visit [www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org). Additionally, the CdLS Foundation has occupational therapists available as professional consultants to provide guidance. Contact your Family Service Coordinator for more details.

Typical Sensory Solutions:	
Noted Behavior	Sensory Solution
Chewing on fingers, clothes, or non-food objects	Cold, tart, and sour foods, chewelry, vibrating toothbrush or teether



Picks at fingers, face, arms	Velcro bracelet, finger fidgets, keep nails trimmed for safety
Making noises with mouth	Blowing and sucking activities such as blowing bubbles, or sucking through a straw
Hitting/banging with hands	Drums, receiving joint input through the hands, wrists, and arms such as wall pushups or laying on stomach while propped up on hands or elbows
Head banging	Rule out medical reason such as headache or mouth/jaw pain, provide pressure across the head by giving deep hugs directly on the head, especially across the forehead

## Key Words:

**Self-stimulation** – The body’s need to receive sensory input in order to maintain a balanced sensory and emotional state (regulation).

**Regulation** – The ability to adjust the level of alertness to meet the demands of a given activity.

**Dysregulation** – The inability to maintain the appropriate level of alertness. This may look like a meltdown or withdrawing from others. A person who is dysregulated typically requires the help of another person to regulate him or herself.