



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 049 | Feeding and swallowing

Oral-motor feeding coordination difficulties

What it means

Oral-motor feeding coordination difficulties affect the movements and timing needed to suck, manage food in the mouth, chew, or drink. This is a descriptive feeding-skill concern. It may coexist with swallowing impairment, but difficulty chewing or sucking does not alone establish that aspiration is occurring. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Prematurity, neurological or neuromuscular conditions, structural differences, respiratory demands, and limited or painful feeding experiences can contribute. Several systems must work together during feeding. The assessment should distinguish coordination needs from sensory avoidance, pain, or a problem with the food or equipment demands. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

A child may tire while sucking, lose liquid from the mouth, have difficulty moving food for chewing, pocket food, take unusually long to eat, or struggle with cup drinking. Coughing, choking, or breathing changes need separate attention to swallowing safety. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A feeding clinician observes age-appropriate skills and food or liquid management, with review of health, growth, intake, seating, and respiration. A speech-language pathologist and other team members may contribute. Instrumental swallowing assessment is considered when clinical findings suggest a safety question. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Therapy targets the specific skill within meaningful, safe feeding. The plan may adjust positioning, pacing, utensils, or food characteristics and treat associated medical problems. Nutrition support is arranged when intake is inadequate. Generic mouth strengthening, forcing a harder texture, or nonspeech exercises are not universal solutions. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Practice only with foods and methods the team has identified as safe. Provide stable, appropriate positioning, manageable meal demands, and rest as needed. Follow cues of distress or fatigue. Ask for a demonstration rather than relying on online exercises or equipment recommendations.

When to seek help

Choking with breathing difficulty, significant respiratory changes during feeds, dehydration, marked fatigue, or poor intake requires medical assessment; severe airway symptoms are an emergency.

Questions for your care team

- Which feeding movement or coordination step is the main barrier?
- Has swallowing safety also been assessed?
- What specific practice is safe and useful at home?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss oral-motor feeding coordination difficulties. Oral-motor feeding coordination difficulties affect the movements and timing needed to suck, manage food in the mouth, chew, or drink. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: A child is not refusing to eat simply because the required feeding movement is difficult.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Oral-motor: movement of structures used within the mouth.
- Pacing: adjusting the rate and pauses of feeding.
- Pocketing: holding food in the cheeks or mouth.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Pediatric Feeding and Swallowing

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/pediatric-feeding-and-swallowing/>

[2] Early Identification of Speech, Language, Swallowing, and Hearing Disorders

<https://www.asha.org/public/Early-Identification-of-Speech-Language-and-Hearing-Disorders/>

[3] Faltering Weight in Children: Parent FAQs

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Glands-Growth-Disorders/Pages/faltering-weight-in-children-parent-faqs.aspx>