



From our December, 2013 Newsletter

Snacking at Pediatric Potentials: Is it really Junk Food?

Many of you are careful watching your children's nutrition. Dyes, sugar, corn syrup, salt, lactose, gluten, nuts etc. are all off limits. Then, enter the doors of Pediatric Potentials and you and your children are encountered by a bowl of salty, spicy, tart, sugary, crunchy, snacks. You ask yourself, "are we on the same team?"

Actually, studies have been conducted that note several counterintuitive points. Children who have lower strength and muscle bulk often eat a lot of slimy, sliding foods. Adding resistance can increase awareness of their mouths, reduce drooling and sloppy eating, and improve articulation. Those same kids often choose the spiciest, most flavorful and crunchiest snacks. These snacks can alert and awaken more than just their taste buds. Strong flavors and crunchy foods can help boost a sluggish system. Examples of "Mouth Alerts" include sour and tart candies, mints, crunchy foods (Dutch pretzel, carrots), and mint gum, according to Therapy Street for Kids.

Then there are children who eat very little during the day. We encourage you to balance carbs to proteins

and find ways to trick the proteins into their diet. That said, sometimes they need a little sugary, chewy boost to wake themselves up long enough to do the work that OT and PT require. (We will also recommend that you give them some protein on the way to the office so they don't "crash and burn"). The Keurig coffee might help you sustain, but we're certainly not recommending caffeine for the kids.

Did you know that there have been memory studies that show that gum chewers are able to learn more and focus better (British Psychological Society (BPS) (2013, March 8)? In our experience, some of our students, particularly those who benefit from it, request gum and are able to settle in to their motor tasks and memory tasks quicker than others. The mouth is a powerful organizing force from the minute a child is born (and don't you find chewing or drinking something helps you focus?). An article in Forbes magazine cites several research studies about how gum chewing can possibly increase alertness, improve memory, lower anxiety, and more.

When we offer students gum, those who benefit from it request it and families report using it as a tool to improving focus during homework. We offer tart, sweet and standard flavors and each child has a strong preference. Some schools have kept a basket of bubble gum available for children and only those who seem to benefit consistently choose it.

So, yes it is really junk food. And moderation is important. But it is a very special junk food, chosen for its sensory, alerting and organizing properties. The fact that the kids perceive it as a treat is great too.

We do offer apples and cheese too, but we always have spicy, crunchy, chewy and sweet snacks to help the children remain alert and organize their thoughts. Notice a few parents and therapists enjoying the “junk food fix too?” That’s the way we like it. Would anyone like a piece of gum?

Something to think about:

Is your child a picky eater? Do they crave oral input? Do they eat only soft or mushy foods? Pediatric Potentials therapists can evaluate your child’s oral sensory and oral motor skills. Depending on your child’s age and development, we may need to access and address oral red flag issues if they are getting in the way of your child’s enjoyment or progress in typical settings.