

What Is Oral-Motor/Feeding/Speech Therapy?

Oral-Motor/Feeding/Speech Therapy is designed to be used with clients with muscle-based articulation disorders related to poor muscle strength such as clients with Down syndrome, Apraxia, and Dysarthria or any client with reduced strength within the Oral cavity. In these populations, we often see low muscle tone in combination with reduced oral strength for feeding as well as in speech production. Oral-Motor Therapy uses Oral Exercise, Tactile Cues and Feeding techniques to increase Oral awareness, teach correct placement for phoneme production, as well as increase strength within the Oral musculature. It addresses the motor component of speech production in addition to the function of the jaw, lips and tongue. Speech in a client with muscle weakness is often characterized by mispronunciations of multiple phonemes, consonant deletions, and an overall lack of intelligibility due to inefficient co-articulation during connected speech. These clients require a muscle-strengthening program in conjunction with traditional articulation therapy. Because the techniques are “fun to use” and are designed to promote success, children enjoy working with the parents and therapists. Each exercise is divided into small task-analyzed steps to insure success. This therapy specialty is used in association with traditional speech therapy. It does not replace techniques already in place.

Normal muscle movement must exist for standard speech clarity to develop. Clients with muscle-based disorders do not have the muscle strength or endurance to support the development of intelligible speech. Many individuals who may benefit from an Oral-Motor program are able to speak in short phrases or even in complete sentences; however they are very difficult to understand. If the muscle weakness is not addressed, these clients will continue to exhibit feeding and speech deficits, specifically in co-articulation or connected speech.

At this time, Oral-Motor/Feeding/Speech Therapy is only available from Speech/Language Pathologists who have been trained through continuing education in this specialty. This training is not yet available at the university level. Initial Evaluation and Program Planning must be conducted by a trained Oral-Motor Specialist. Once a Program Plan has been established, a licensed Speech/Language Pathologist, through consultation, may carry out the recommended Program. The therapists at Innovative Therapists International in Tucson, Arizona specialize in working with clients with muscle-based disorders and have had extensive training in this area.

Refer to the article “The Oral-Motor Myths of Down Syndrome” by Sara Rosenfeld-Johnson for more information. It is available on-line at www.talktoolstm.com.