

Building a Teething Ring for the Child with Autism

by Thomas A. McKean – 06/30/09

I have wanted to write this article for over 15 years. Going all the way back to when I was writing for the *Autism Society of America* when I was a board member with that organization. I wrote it many times, anywhere from one page to many, but I never had the guts to submit it for publication.

But times change. And as time changes, so does autism. Or at least our *perception* of autism. Perception of one's self can change as well. I have no doubt I am more comfortable with who I am now than I was back in my best forgotten, ne'er-do-well ASA days. So, having said that, here is an article on how to build a teether for your child (or adult?) with autism.

Oral and gustatory sensitivities in individuals with autism are now common knowledge. Of course this can lead to problems, such as chewing on power cords, for example. Yet these are valid needs that need to be met. How can we meet these needs in a way that is safe for the individual? You can't just go out to your local Wal-Mart and buy a 99¢ teether. That would be too easy. And as everyone reading this magazine knows, nothing in autism is ever easy.

Each person's needs are going to be different. Just because something works for one doesn't mean it will work for the other. So it is with teethers. Your child is not going to bother if they aren't the right feel and texture. He or she will go right back to the power cord or whatever else you want them to stay away from.

So the first step (maybe the only step) in finding a teether is experimentation. There are many different kinds and types out there. Some are expensive. Most aren't. Some vibrate or make annoying little racing car or cell phone noises. Most don't. Try different types and see which your child likes. Then stick with it. Of course there is a possibility that your child may decide it is time for something different, in which case the process is repeated.

For adults, it may be a bit more difficult because your choices are more limited. While many consider teethers to be inappropriate for adults, most teethers are either infant or theme based, which is even more so. Finding teething rings that look even the least bit non-infant is next to impossible.

Because of this, I (sometimes) carry a "Link-a-Doo" on my keychain. One of the round ones, not the animals. I love the rounds, hate the animals. The problem with doing this, of course, is that the teether gets quite dirty floating on a keychain in a car or out gathering dust as the scooter it has just started as it goes down the street. Sometimes it is difficult to keep them clean.

They are my personal favorite. It took me forever to find something that worked. But these do work well. You can link them together to make a chain, a belt, or a regular teething ring. Or, like I do with my keys, you can just take one along with you. Sometimes I use a vacuum sealer to take one or more in my car.

These are available at Wal-Mart, and the round teethers do not have an infant look about them.

Be wary of teethers with water in them. They tend to break every now and again and are not well suited for travel or for outside the house.

As I said, when you have an infant, you can go to the store, get a set of cheap plastic keys and be done with it. If you are fortunate, this will work for the child with autism as well. But with autism, there are many things to consider. The texture, the hardness or softness, the size, and the overall design, just to name a few.

One thing you can do, and I have found this very effective in my own work, is to *combine* teethers. Get a ring of a good size and put a few different types of teethers on it. That way there are options. What works one day might not work the next, then the day after it will be right again. Autism is strange that way. I have made a few of these for a few kids I have worked with here and there and it seems to work.

Sometimes what the kids are chewing on can give you a clue as to what to get. For instance, there was a "coil" teething ring made a few years ago designed specifically for children who chew on phone cords. Parents reported it kept the kids off the phone cord. These are *very hard to find* anymore and to my knowledge they are no longer available here in the States. But you can still get them here:

<http://www.mothersbliss.com/shopping/curlycoilteether.asp>

For the more spiritual among you reading this, consider having the teether anointed once you have it pieced together. I have a couple of teethers that have been anointed and now I never use anything else. There is enough variety on them that there is no need to.

The need of the child or adult with autism may well be sensory as opposed to psychological. If this is the case, the need should be allowed to be met. By providing a teething ring of various types and textures of teethers, this need can be met efficiently and inexpensively and safely.

If only *all* of the problems of autism could be solved the same way!