



Ideas to assist with teeth brushing

Why does my child hate having their teeth brushed?

Many young children and those with sensory difficulties dislike having their teeth brushed. Our mouths and lips have lots and lots of sensory receptors. These sensory receptors help us to understand about what we put in our mouths. This is why in early infancy and beyond our children bring everything to their mouths instinctively as our mouth helps to understand and learn. Sometimes our children struggle to interpret effectively what they put in their mouths. They may have little awareness of what is going on inside their mouth and therefore certain textures, movements like teeth brushing can be confusing and scary. Some children can be extremely sensitive to touch within and around their mouths and therefore teeth brushing can feel extremely uncomfortable and even painful.



The Dentist

Tooth brushing prevents gum disease, tooth decay and reduces the risk of future dental problems. It is crucial that our children visit the dentist regularly and if your child is refusing to have their teeth brushed that you discuss this firstly with your dentist to rule out any medical problems.

Please remember that the ideas and activities in this programme will not work for all children as we all respond and react to sensory input differently. Lots of ideas have been provided so that hopefully there will be some ideas that will work for your child.

It is suggested that all children are supervised whilst brushing their teeth to ensure their safety. If you are concerned that any of the activities or tips pose a risk to your child, please do not attempt.

Generic Tips

- Start with finding a calm place to brush teeth, often standing by the sink can be too over stimulating particularly with the running water and they can become fixated with this. Think about where and when they are the most calm and consider starting to introduce ideas around teeth brushing then. Be aware that our children may now have a negative association with toothbrushes and we need to approach this slightly differently than before! Bath time can sometimes be a great time to introduce brushing!
- Getting them to see and watch you brush your teeth is really important so that they see that it isn't a scary or negative process.
- Consider using a social story to talk through the process with them. Try watching on the internet children brushing their teeth and/or reading stories about teeth brushing.
- Go and look at toothbrushes together in the shops and get them to choose one they like. Encourage them to play with it and explore using it throughout the day so it is seen as a positive activity.
- Get them to practice brushing your teeth. You can add in a mirror showing them where they are putting the toothbrush in your mouth. Make it fun by pulling funny faces together.



- A known song that lasts approximately 2 minutes is a great way to engage your child and help them to understand how long they have to brush and when it will be finished. Make sure you chose something they like as you are going to hear it a lot!
- You can use a Timer App to give you a clear visual to help them to know how long and what they have to do. There is a free Oral-B Disney app available. <https://oralb.com/en-us/disney-magic-timer/>
- Consider what type of toothbrush you try! There are lots of toothbrushes out there. Experiment with different options. Soft baby toothbrushes, vibrating toothbrushes, 3 sided toothbrushes, finger toothbrushes, NUK brushes, singing toothbrushes and ones that light up.
- Consider the toothpaste you are using or encouraging them to use. Sometimes our children can be very sensitive to the taste, smell and texture of it and can be just too much for them. Consider when starting toothbrush just encouraging the brush at first as adding another sensory dimension to the task maybe just too much.
- Consider the temperature of the water you are using. Very cold water may be too over whelming for them!
- Once you have done the above work again experiment with different toothpastes. Start with a mild or non-flavoured toothpaste, that is non-foaming.
- When brushing with your child encourage them to be an active participant and hold the toothbrush whilst you guide them. If they won't allow you to help, consider that any tooth brushing is good and that with repeated practice their abilities will improve!
- Create a consistent and predictable routine when to attempt tooth brushing using a daily routine chart. Give them warning before you are going to brush teeth.



Preparation before Toothbrushing

Often our children like firm deep pressure touch and muscle resistance activities to assist with calming them (not all children!). Below are a few ideas of things you can do prior to teeth brushing to try in order for them to be in the best place to cope with the sensory demands of tooth brushing;

- Give them a big bear hug or encourage them to hug themselves tightly.
- Roll them up like a hotdog!
- Get them to tense up like a statue or push their hands into a therapy ball against the wall or attempt to push the wall down!
- Provide them with a chew to bite down on.
- Consider whether sitting with them on your knee or sitting on the floor with you behind them will provide them the close contact they like. Tooth brushing doesn't have to be at a sink!
- If they will tolerate apply firm pressure to the gums working from the front teeth outwards, you can get them to help you and use a mirror to see what you are doing.

If no toothbrush is tolerated

- Start with using your finger and or a flannel. Add distraction in to the process to help them to tolerate the activity. Work on just getting them to tolerate the flannel and finger first.
- Try adding in a silicone tooth and gum brush for them to chew which has bristles on it.
- Once the flannel or tooth and gum brush is tolerated you can try adding some mild or non- flavoured toothpaste to them.
- Slowly start to introduce different toothbrushes into play and around the house. See what they appear to be more interested in.
- Once you have done this you can start to introduce this into their daily routine.



- Be aware that if they help you to brush their teeth then they are more likely to tolerate the experience.

All the above will take time and lots of patience.

Equipment that may help to support your child with toothbrushing skills - (all readily available from Amazon or Self care websites)

Finger Brushes - https://www.amazon.co.uk/Dr-Barmans-Super-Compact-Junior-Toothbrush/dp/B0012L3WHE/ref=sr_1_6?crid=VLN18W583PKE&dchild=1&keywords=3+sided+toothbrush+child&qid=1610645679&srefix=3+sided+tooth%2Caps%2C156&sr=8-6

Chewable / Silicone Tooth and Gum Brush - https://www.amazon.co.uk/Toothbrush-Scilicone-Chewable-Babies-Toddlers/dp/B087Q6TCMS/ref=sr_1_23?dchild=1&keywords=tooth+and+gum+brush&qid=1610645804&sr=8-23

3 Sided Brush - https://www.amazon.co.uk/Dr-Barmans-Super-Compact-Junior-Toothbrush/dp/B0012L3WHE/ref=sr_1_6?crid=VLN18W583PKE&dchild=1&keywords=3+sided+toothbrush+child&qid=1610645679&srefix=3+sided+tooth%2Caps%2C156&sr=8-6

Nuk Brush - <https://www.amazon.co.uk/NUK-62704-Training-Toothbrush-Set/dp/B002UXQRKM>

Non foaming / flavourless toothpaste - https://www.amazon.co.uk/Oranurse-3659273-50ml-Unflavoured-Toothpaste/dp/B0085AOSU0/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=unflavoured+toothpaste+oranurse&qid=1610645547&sr=8-5

Timer Apps - <https://oralb.com/en-us/disney-magic-timer/>

Visual symbols for toothbrushing - <https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/resources/ot-activityinformation-sheets/visual-aids-for-learning-teeth-brushing/>

Fun songs for Toothbrushing - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCio_xVlgQ0

References

Butterworth et al 2018. Occupational Therapy Tools for Autism Spectrum Disorder. London. Lightning Source. Supporting children with autism to look after their teeth (online). Available from: <https://www.optionsautism.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Options-Issue-15-May-2018-Looking-After-Your-Teeth.pdf> (Accessed: 13 January 2021).

Tips and Strategies to Help Children with Poor Tolerance to Toothbrushing (online). Available from: <https://www.toolstogrowot.com/blog/2015/04/26/tips-strategies-to-help-children-with-poor-tolerance-for-tooth-brushing>. (Accessed: 13 January 2021).

Tips for Toothbrushing with Oral Defensiveness (online). Available from: <https://www.arktherapeutic.com/blog/tips-for-toothbrushing-with-oral-defensiveness/>. (Accessed: 13 January 2021).

Yack E, Aquilla P & Sutton S (2015) Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration. 3rd Edition. TX. Sensory World.

Lucinda Warren - Fox Wood School Occupational Therapist - January 2021