

## Teeth Brushing

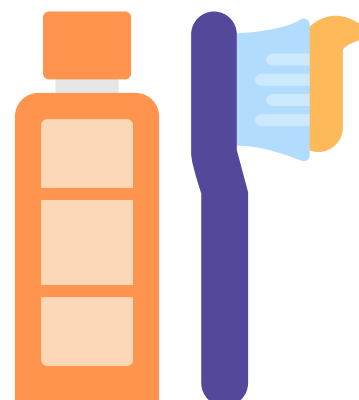
Brushing your teeth is an essential part of oral hygiene. Setting good habits from a young age is important. The NHS recommends that all children brush their teeth twice a day and it is recommended that an adult helps a child to brush their teeth until at least the age of seven, children with additional needs may need assistance beyond the age of seven. Children may dislike or avoid brushing their teeth for various reasons; some children don't like the taste of toothpaste or are unable to tolerate the feel of the toothbrush inside their mouth, the smell of the toothpaste or the sound of the brushing. Some children may also struggle to hold the toothbrush and move it around their mouth.



### Introducing teeth cleaning

When it's time to start cleaning your child's teeth, it is important to try and keep it as fun as possible. In the early days, it's important to focus on this activity becoming part of your child's daily routine, rather than them being able to do the task independently. It is not uncommon for toddlers and younger children to show resistance when it's time to clean their teeth, but it is important to persevere and remain as calm as possible. You may wish to consider some of our top tips for introducing teeth cleaning:

- Introduce teeth cleaning in pretend play. For example, your child could pretend to clean their doll or teddy's teeth with a dry toothbrush. It may also be fun to play dentists and take it in turns to pretend to check each other's teeth and give them a clean
- Whilst there are games available to purchase that support this, you could make a mouth out of Play-Doh yourself, and pretend to clean all of the teeth
- Where possible, read stories about teeth cleaning. This can help communicate the importance of this task to the child and why we all must do it
- Allow your child to observe family members cleaning their teeth, from parents to siblings. Again, this shows that it is an important part of everybody's daily routine. The youngest member of the family may have less opportunities to observe, for example, they may be in bed when the rest of the family clean their teeth at night, which means it is harder for them to mirror the behaviour
- When cleaning your child's teeth, give them a second brush to hold and play with. This helps them get used to holding the brush by themselves and makes it less of an 'alien object'
- As their mouths are still so small, make sure you use a small-headed toothbrush. Using a toothbrush which is too large may catch their gums or cheek, and turn the process into something negative
- To make the activity more fun, it may be useful to use a song or rhyme to teach the child. There are many videos available on YouTube
- To increase interest in teeth cleaning, it may be helpful to allow the child to choose their own toothbrush in the shop (i.e. one with their favourite character on, or in their favourite colour)
- Remember to stay calm. It can be stressful when your child is refusing to have their teeth cleaned, but it's important to stay calm and not make the experience into something negative that the child won't forget



## Setting the 'just right' challenge with your child

It is important to enable your child to gain a sense of achievement when learning a new skill. The 'just right' challenge ensures that you are encouraging your child to develop their skills and independence, whilst ensuring that the goal they are working towards is realistic. The sense of achievement that they experience acts as a great motivator to encourage your child to keep working towards mastering these skills.



### Things to consider:

- How long do you expect your child to do the task for?
- How much of the task do you/they expect to complete by themselves?
- What support will you provide?

## Top tips for supporting your child in developing their skills

- ✓ Focus on your child tolerating you brushing their teeth for them first. Once they're comfortable with this, you can begin to develop their participation
- ✓ Break the task down so you gradually increase their involvement over time. For example, you could ask them to brush their teeth, and then you brush afterwards to ensure the mouth is clean
- ✓ Teach a consistent routine (using the same prompts, same toothbrush and same toothpaste, doing it in the same place, around the same time each day) to help them remember how to do the task
- ✓ Remember that each step of progress is positive! So, if your child cleans the front teeth, but forgets the rest, praise them for cleaning their front teeth so well. The more you praise your child for each step of progress the better, as it will make this learning process much more positive and encourage your child to consistently brush their teeth
- ✓ Consider your child's mood (including level of tiredness) when asking them to engage in the task. Adjust your expectations as required



## Types of toothbrushes:

### Silicone

Regular toothbrushes can feel foreign and unfamiliar, particularly to children with oral sensitivities. Instead of a regular toothbrush, find a toothbrush with soft or silicone bristles. These softer toothbrushes can help desensitise your child's mouth and gums. Many specialty or baby toothbrushes feature small silicone bristles that allow your child to gradually grow accustomed to the sensation of brushing.

### Three-Sided

A three-sided toothbrush can be helpful for children who do not want the brush in their mouth for a long period of time or try to cut corners with their brushing. The brush makes sure that the child gets maximum brushing effectiveness in minimal time as the whole tooth is being cleaned, not just one side at a time.

### Electric

An electric toothbrush provides a consistent sensation and may be better tolerated than a traditional toothbrush. Some electric toothbrushes offer a 'pulsating' motion rather than vibrating, which may feel better for some children. An electric toothbrush may also be useful for children who struggle to move a toothbrush around their mouth. With an electric toothbrush, the child will only need to position the toothbrush in their mouth and not coordinate the brushing action as well.


Difficulty	Solution
Holding a toothbrush	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A toothbrush with a chunky handle may be easier for the child to hold (Battery operated toothbrushes often have novelty chunky handles)</li><li>• Offer hand over hand support</li></ul>
Moving the brush around their mouth to clean all of their teeth or struggles with the brushing action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cleaning their teeth in front of a mirror will give the child visual feedback so they can see what they are doing and know where to move their toothbrush. A footstep or stool may be needed so the child is high enough to see themselves in the mirror</li><li>• It may be fun to make a mouth with teeth out of Play-Doh, so the child can practise moving the brush around the teeth</li><li>• Offer hand over hand support to help your child learn the movements and pressure required</li><li>• See our guide to toothbrushes</li></ul>
Squeezing toothpaste onto brush	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children may find it easier to use toothpaste in a pump dispenser or tube squeezer as manipulating a tube of paste can be tricky</li><li>• Provide hand over hand support to help the child feel the pressure required. Practise squeezing other tubes, e.g. icing tubes to decorate cakes, glitter glue during art and craft</li><li>• Prepare the toothpaste tube so only light pressure is required to dispense it successfully. For example, ease the toothpaste up the tube so your child has to apply minimal effort to get the amount they need</li><li>• To begin with, support your child by holding the toothbrush while they squeeze the paste out</li></ul>

Struggles to complete the correct steps of the task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are various visuals available online that give a step-by-step breakdown of the task. Consider printing one off and sticking it in the bathroom for your child to follow</li> <li>• Teach your child about the different parts of their mouth and giving it a name. You may wish to do this by asking your child to look in the mirror and use their finger to identify each area. When naming each section, keep it simple, using words such as top front, top bottom. Once you've established words for each area of the mouth, create an order in which your child cleans them. Ensure this order is always the same, and it will soon become a familiar sequence to your child</li> </ul>
Avoids or dislikes cleaning their teeth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make brushing as fun as possible e.g. sing songs and use fun apps. This can be a useful distraction but also help the child to see there is a definite end to the activity (i.e. at the end of the song)</li> <li>• You could make a game of teeth cleaning to make it more fun. For example, your child could pretend there is a dinosaur in their mouth and they need to use their toothbrush to chase it away</li> <li>• Use reward charts, stickers and certificates to award achievements however small they may be</li> <li>• If your child does not like the taste of the toothpaste, use mild or unflavoured toothpaste</li> <li>• If your child becomes stressed or anxious during this activity, give them a relaxing bath before, or even brush their teeth whilst in the bath. Where possible, try to give them some control over the experience (choosing where to do it for example) and do it as early as possible before bedtime so they can calm down before going to sleep</li> <li>• Consider what pressure and speed you or your child is applying when cleaning their teeth. It may be that your child prefers softer or firmer, and faster or slower sensation</li> </ul>
Child does not clean their teeth for the desired two minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use an egg timer or sand timer</li> <li>• There are specified toothbrushing apps that allow children to choose a character that times them when cleaning their teeth</li> </ul>

**If you have any concerns about your child's dental health, including pain, sensitivity or bleeding, please refer to your dentist for advice and support.**



## Contact us

 **Children's Community Therapies**  
 Occupational Therapy  
 Chelsley Wood Primary Care Centre  
 16 Crabtree Drive, Chelsley Wood  
 Birmingham, B37 5BU

 0121 722 8010  
 [paediatric.occupationaltherapy@nhs.net](mailto:paediatric.occupationaltherapy@nhs.net)  
 [childrenscommunitytherapies.uhb.nhs.uk](http://childrenscommunitytherapies.uhb.nhs.uk)