The Children's Toothbrushing Guide

There is lots of expert advice available, including for families of children with SEND. Visit the Children's Toothbrushing Guide website for useful links, resources and tips from experts.

Why do baby teeth matter?

Baby teeth aren't just practice teeth. They help children bite and chew, support speech development, guide adult teeth into place and boost confidence when smiling.

When teeth aren't cared for, it leads to tooth decay which can cause pain, infection and long-term oral health problems.

Did you know?

- Removal of decayed teeth is the most common operation for children aged 5-9.
- More than 1 in 5 children aged 5 have tooth decay – and that is almost entirely preventable!
- Brushing children's teeth right from the start helps develop good oral health habits from childhood to adulthood.

Brushing children's teeth

When to brush:

- Start as soon as the first tooth appears.
- Brush twice each day - last thing at night or bedtime and on at least one other occasion.
- Brush for your child when they are very young. Then supervise until at least age 7, or they have reached the stage where they can tie their own shoelaces.

What do you need?

A small headed, soft or medium-soft bristled toothbrush

Change the toothbrush every 3 months, or sooner if the bristles are damaged.

Fluoride toothpaste

- Under 3 years
  a smear of toothpaste containing at least 1000ppm (parts per million) fluoride
- 3+ years
  a pea-sized amount of toothpaste containing between 1350-1500ppm fluoride

Check toothpaste packaging for fluoride levels.

How to brush

- Brush for 2 minutes, covering every tooth.
- Spit, don't rinse with water, to leave the fluoride coating the teeth.
- Brush using small circles, covering every surface. Remember to gently brush gums and behind teeth.

Visit the Toothbrushing Guide website for links to additional information, advice and guidance.

Top tips include:

- Try a toothbrushing song or visual timer/app (e.g. Brush DJ) to encourage children to brush for the full two minutes. Visit our useful links page to find songs about toothbrushing.
- A mirror can help children see where they are brushing.
- Brush a favourite toy's teeth alongside your child for encouragement.
- Brush alongside your child to model good toothbrushing.

Other ways to ensure good oral health

It's not all about brushing. There are other things you should do to ensure your child has healthy teeth and gums.

Diet

- Cut down on 'free sugars' (any sugar added to food or drink) like those in cakes, sweets, sauces, juice, smoothies and some yoghurts and breakfast cereals.
- Offer water and milk as main drinks. If you do offer sugary drinks, keep them to mealtimes only and ensure they are very well diluted.
- Cut down on sugary snacks and drinks between meals.
- Limit the use of foods you suck from pouches. When using them, squeeze onto a spoon rather than sucking.

Bottles, cups and sipping

- From 6 months, introduce an open cup or a cup with a free flowing valve.
- From 12 months, avoid bottles or sippy cups that need sucking.

Dentist visits

- Schedule your child's first dental appointment once their first teeth appear and before their first birthday.
- Keep up with regular check-ups – dentists can spot problems early and help prevent decay.
- Ask the dental team for advice on looking after your child's oral health.

Supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Children with SEND, especially those with sensory needs, motor skill or communications challenges may find brushing harder. It's important to establish a good toothbrushing routine as early as possible as it can be more difficult to introduce to older children. There is lots of expert advice and guidance available.

Visit the Children's Toothbrushing Guide website for links to additional information, advice and guidance.

Top tips include:

- Try different flavours of toothpaste, flavour-free toothpaste and/or brushes of various sizes and textures.
- Introduce brushing gradually: start with the toothbrush on the lips, then inside the mouth step by step.
- Brushing in different spaces (like the bedroom or sofa) can make children feel more relaxed.

This guide was created collaboratively by

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