Children with Disabilities can also Enjoy

Good Oral Health

Cues for Parents





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Preface

All parents want their children to have a healthy mouth. However, mentally-challenged children often have difficulties taking care of themselves, so they are more prone to tooth decay and periodontal disease. They need help from their parents to learn self-care skills and develop a healthy lifestyle. As a parent of a child with disabilities, I have encountered many obstacles in the process of taking care of their oral health and would like to share my experience with you. At the same time, I have also organized some questions raised by other parents and provided my suggested solutions.

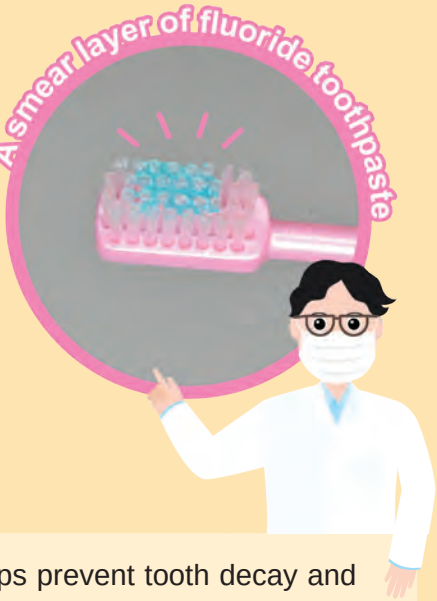




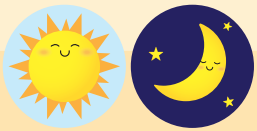
I am worried that my child would swallow the toothpaste. Can I let them brush without toothpaste?

You don't have to worry about this. Dentists suggest children to use a pea-sized blob of toothpaste every time they brush their teeth. If your child is unable to rinse their mouth or spit out the toothpaste, you can squash the toothpaste into a smear layer (approximately half a pea-sized amount), so that no harm will be made even if they accidentally swallow the toothpaste.





The fluoride in toothpaste helps prevent tooth decay and strengthen the teeth. Therefore, children should brush their teeth with fluoride toothpaste every day in the morning and before bed.



What kind of toothbrush should I choose for my child?

Toothbrushes with soft bristles are preferred as they are gentle to the gums. Toothbrushes should be replaced once the bristles have signs of wearing out.

For better control, the head of the toothbrush should be chosen according to the size of the mouth.

0-2 years



Brush head size should be approximately the diameter of a Hong Kong 10-cent coin (~15mm)

2-6 years



Brush head size should be approximately the diameter of a Hong Kong 20-cent coin (~19mm)

6-12 years



Brush head size should be approximately the diameter of a Hong Kong 50-cent coin (~22mm)

12 years or above



Brush head size should be approximately the diameter of a Hong Kong one-dollar coin (~25mm)

If your child lacks strength in the hand muscles, wrap a towel or some soft plastics around the toothbrush handle to thicken it so that your child is easier to have a firmer grip.

How can I help my child learn to brush?

According to the dentists, unless children have fully mastered their toothbrushing skills, parents should help clean their teeth at least once a day. After each meal, parents should check if there is any food debris left in their children's mouth. Brush their teeth or wipe the debris away whenever necessary.



Have your child face the mirror when you brush their teeth, so they can learn how to brush by observation. You should also use one hand to support their chin.



Here are some tips from the dentists for brushing your child's teeth:

Keep the toothbrush bristles angled towards the gum line

Brush their teeth (at most two by two) back and forth gently for at least ten times



To help my child master toothbrushing skills, I follow the same sequence every time I brush their teeth. I make sure that my methods and sequence are consistent, so that my child can grasp the skills more easily. My dentist recommends that I follow the steps below to teach and help my child brush their teeth.

1 Brush the outer surfaces of the lower teeth





2 Brush the outer surfaces of the upper teeth

3 Brush the chewing surfaces of the lower and upper teeth





4 Brush the inner surfaces of the lower teeth

5 Brush the inner surfaces of the upper teeth



Every child has different learning ability. You should work with them at a pace that suits their learning ability. Do spend more time on the areas where your child has difficulty mastering, and provide suitable guidance according to their progress.

My child can neither spit out the water nor rinse their mouth. What should I do?

My child had this problem before, but I did not give up on them. Later, I came up with a way to help them spit out the toothpaste foam:



1 Before brushing their teeth, I put a bib on them to prevent their clothes from getting wet



2 and prepare a glass of drinking water for them to rinse their mouth



3 Then, I pour water into their mouth slowly



4 so that the water and toothpaste foam can flow down from their mouth naturally

At home, I blow soap bubbles, paper strips, feathers and paper bags with them to teach them how to spit out water. Alternatively, you may let them suck on an ice cube or squirt a mouthful of bitter tea – something that they will try to get rid of by spitting it out. Whatever you do, do not give up. Have faith that your child will learn how to spit out water, and also be able to brush their own teeth one day.

My child lacks patience when brushing their teeth. What should I do?



My child has the same problem too. First, I will try to find out the reason. If they are impatient because they want to play or watch TV, I will let them pick a time to brush after dinner. When I let them brush after playtime, they appear to be more patient. If they perform well, I will praise them for their patience. This gives them more motivation to brush their teeth next time.

A child will be less irritated with less frequent opening and closing of the mouth. But when they look tired or when there is excess saliva in their mouth, I will let them rest or rinse their mouth before I carry on.



My child is unwilling to brush their teeth. What can I do?



I know this problem is not easy to fix, but please do not force your child. Instead, look carefully at their teeth and the soft tissues in their mouth to find out why they refuse to do so. Ask them if they feel uncomfortable during brushing. The causes of discomfort could be:



Tooth decay or toothache – In this case, take them to a dentist for treatment immediately.

Mobile teeth – They may refuse to brush their teeth to avoid touching the mobile teeth. In this case, give them support and encouragement.





Aphthous ulcer – They may refuse to brush their teeth because of discomfort and pain.

In this case, ask them to brush slowly and gently.



Dislike the toothpaste flavour – In this case, switch to another toothpaste of a flavour that they like, or let them choose their own toothpaste and toothbrush. This helps increase their interest in brushing their teeth.

Tiredness – They may refuse to brush their teeth at night because they are too tired. In this case, let them brush their teeth earlier and they will behave better. If they are willing to brush, I will praise them for that right away. Phrases like, “I am so happy that you can brush your teeth properly!” are effective to motivate your child to brush.





Emotional instability – If they are throwing a tantrum, wait patiently for them to calm down before asking them to brush.



When my child was younger, they also refused to brush their teeth without a special reason. So, I let them watch me brush instead. This set a good example for them and they soon understood that one should make brushing an everyday habit. Now that they are willing to brush their teeth, I will brush beside them too. Toothbrushing can be fun when it becomes a family activity.

My child always bites the toothbrush, and cannot keep their mouth open during brushing.



Many parents have encountered this problem and it can be a real headache. My solution is to wrap a pair of chopsticks in a towel and fix it in place. Let them bite the roll on one side to keep their mouth open while you slip the toothbrush in and brush their teeth.









My child always sticks out their tongue when I brush their teeth. What can I do?



It is common for children to try swallowing or sticking out their tongues when they brush. I will carry on as long as it does not block me from moving the toothbrush. I try to run the toothbrush from the tip of the tongue all the way to the innermost tooth along the gum line.

If they show signs of agitation and avoidance, I will check if the toothbrush is suitably placed. If I push the toothbrush too far back, I will let them rinse their mouth, pacify them, and let them take a break. After that, I will resume brushing their teeth. Find ways to help them relax, (e.g. crack a joke, talk to them, sing a song, play some music or tell a story). Make them feel at ease so that their tongue will relax, then it is an opportune time to brush their teeth!



My child retches whenever I brush their teeth, what can I do to help them?



This is indeed worrying, but it also shows that your child is feeling uncomfortable. Do try to soothe them so that they will not see brushing as an ordeal. Using a toothbrush with a smaller head and avoid pushing the toothbrush too far back help reduce retching. It is also advisable to brush in a well-lit environment. If retching continues, practice more to improve your brushing skills so that you can speed up the process.



If retching still continues, let them rest for a while. Although this will take more time, it is important for you to remain patient when you brush for them.

When I brush my child's teeth, their head always moves involuntarily.

When my child's head moves involuntarily, I will stand behind them, put my arm around them and gently lift their chin to keep their head in place. It is easier for me to brush their teeth this way. Do not be too aggressive, make sure that you brush their teeth when they are willing. Otherwise, they may see brushing as an ordeal. Praise them generously if they behave well. This will encourage them to do better next time.



It is difficult to clean my child's misaligned teeth.



This problem can be easily solved by picking a toothbrush with a smaller head. Although that it will take more time, you should still brush each and every tooth carefully.



Will the spaces between my child's teeth get widened if I remove the food debris trapped in- between with toothpicks?



I totally understand your concern. Toothpicks can neither effectively remove food debris nor dental plaque between the teeth and hence are not suitable to use. Dental floss, on the other hand, can effectively clean the adjacent surfaces of the teeth. Flossing every day is the best way to ensure that my child's teeth are thoroughly cleaned. Controlling the floss with my fingers was difficult at first. So, my dentist introduced me to use dental floss picks. It is much more convenient to clean my child's teeth with dental floss picks. Sometimes, you may find it rather hard to floss your child's upper teeth. It will be easier if you tilt their head slightly upward.







Here are points to note suggested by dentists when using dental floss picks:



1. Pull the floss back and forth to slowly slide it between the teeth



2. Place the floss closely against one of the adjacent tooth surfaces



3. Starting from the lowest point, gently slide the floss up and down for three times to clean the surface



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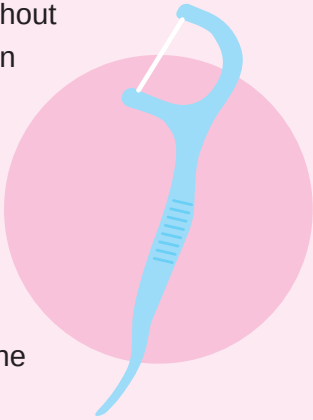
Place the floss closely against the other adjacent tooth surface



5

Again, starting from the lowest point, gently slide the floss up and down for three times to clean the surface

When your child can brush their own teeth without your help, and has got used to your cleaning in between their teeth with dental floss picks, you can start teaching them how to floss. Learning to use dental floss takes time, and you should teach with patience. Take one step at a time and start with the basics. Repeat every single step so that your child can become familiar with the process and master the skills easily.



It is difficult to slide the dental floss between the teeth.



I have been through the same before. When I took my child to a dental check-up, I told the dentist this problem. The dentist told me not to worry, and asked me to floss their teeth in a well-lit environment, make sure that the floss was placed between two teeth, and gently guide it in a zigzag motion until it slid between the teeth.

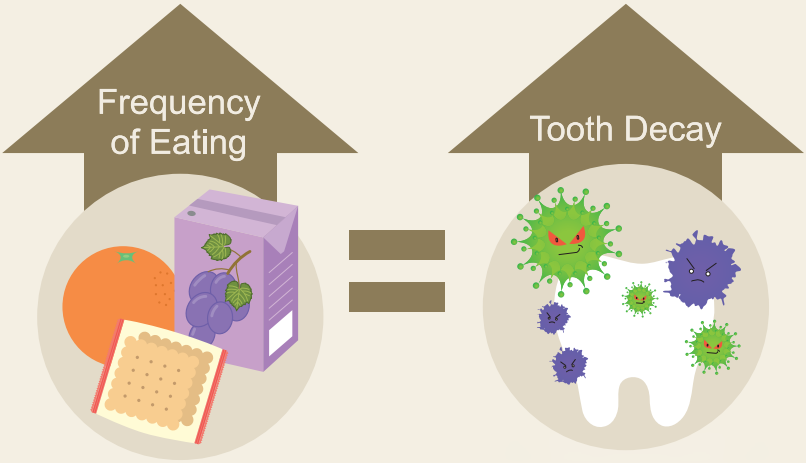
Calculus can block the floss from sliding between the teeth. Scaling and polishing helps improve the situation. Misaligned teeth can make flossing difficult. Practice more until you master the technique.

My child already brushes their teeth every morning and at night, why do they still have decayed teeth, and even dental abscesses?

It is a common misconception that tooth decay can be avoided simply by brushing with fluoride toothpaste. Good dietary habits are also essential in tooth decay prevention. After each meal, the bacteria on the tooth surfaces will break down sugar in food and produce acid. The acid released then causes the minerals to be lost from the teeth, ultimately leading to tooth decay.



In other words, every time you eat or drink, you give one chance for bacteria to cause your tooth to decay. Therefore, reducing the frequency of eating and drinking of your child can make tooth decay less likely to occur.





You should let your child have breakfast, lunch and dinner at regular times, make sure that they eat a sufficient amount of food during each meal. If they feel hungry between meals, you may give them snacks only once. I understand that children are fond of snacks. You can let them eat snacks near regular mealtimes. This helps satisfy their craving for snacks, and at the same time, will not increase the risk of tooth decay. Give them water when they are thirsty. If possible, do not let them have other beverages. Excessive sugar intake can lead to dental decay and increase the risk of obesity, causing negative impacts to both oral health and general health.

I will never offer snacks as a reward. You may consider giving your child stationery or toys instead. You may also play games with them or set up a reward program at home (e.g. buy them a present if they score enough points) as encouragement.







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