

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. I have encountered many obstacles in this process myself and would like to share my experience with you.

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

A pea sized amount of fluoride toothpaste



A smear of fluoride 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 his mouth or spit out the toothpaste, you can squash the toothpaste into a thin flake (approximately half a pea-sized amount), so that no harm will be made even if he accidentally swallows 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. Those aged under 6 should use children's fluoride toothpaste, whereas those aged 6 or above and adults should use regular fluoride toothpaste to brush their teeth.

What kind of toothbrush should I choose for my child?

From my experience, toothbrushes with soft bristles are preferred as they are gentle to the gums. Toothbrushes should be replaced once the bristles are worn.

Moreover, the head of the toothbrush should be chosen according to the size of the mouth of the child so that the toothbrush is better controlled.

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 make it thicker, this will make the grip firmer.

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How can I help my child learn to brush?

According to the dentists, unless children have fully mastered the 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 mouths. Brush their teeth or wipe the debris away whenever necessary.

Let your child face the mirror when you brush his teeth. You should also face the mirror, stand behind him and beware that you do not block his view. Let him watch how you brush his teeth so that he can learn to do it himself. Meanwhile, you should use one hand to support his chin.

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

Keep the toothbrush bristles angled against the gum line

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



To help my child master the toothbrushing skills, I follow the same sequence every time I brush my child's 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 his teeth.

Brush the outer surfaces of the lower teeth



Brush the outer surfaces of the upper teeth



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Brush the chewing surfaces of the lower and upper teeth



Brush the inner surfaces of the lower teeth



Brush the inner surfaces of the upper teeth



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

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

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

Before brushing his teeth, I put a bib on him to prevent his clothes from getting wet, and prepare a glass of drinking water for him to rinse his mouth. When he is ready to rinse his mouth, I ask him to lower his head, look down and open his mouth. Then I pour water into his mouth slowly, so that the

water and toothpaste foam can flow down from his mouth naturally.

At home, I blow soap bubbles, paper strips, feathers and paper bags with him to teach him how to spit out water. Alternatively, you may let him suck on an ice cube or squirt a mouthful of bitter tea – something that he 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 his own teeth one day.

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My child lacks patience to brush his teeth. What should I do?

My child has the same problem too. First, I will try to find out the reason. If he is impatient because he wants to play or watch TV, I will let him pick a time to brush after dinner. When I let him brush after playtime, he appears to be more patient. If he performs well, I will praise him for his patience, this gives him more motivation to brush his teeth next time.

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

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My daughter is unwilling to brush her 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 her teeth and the soft tissues in her mouth to find out why she refuses to do so. Ask her if she feels uncomfortable during brushing. The causes of discomfort could be:

- Tooth decay or toothache – In this case, take her to a dentist for treatment immediately.
- Mobile teeth – She may refuse to brush her teeth to avoid touching the mobile teeth. In this case, give her support and encouragement.
- Aphthous ulcer – She may refuse to brush her teeth because of the discomfort and pain. In this case, ask her to brush slowly and gently.

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- Dislike the toothpaste flavour – In this case, switch to another toothpaste of a flavour that she likes, or let her choose her own toothpaste and toothbrush. This helps increase her interest in brushing her teeth.
- Tiredness – She may refuse to brush her teeth at night because she is too tired. In this case, let her brush her teeth earlier and she will behave better. If she is willing to brush, I will praise her 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 she is throwing a tantrum, wait patiently for her to calm down before asking her to brush.

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

My daughter always bites the toothbrush, she cannot keep her 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, roll it up and fix it in place. Let her bite the roll on one side of her mouth so that her mouth will stay open while you slip the toothbrush in and brush her teeth.



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

It is common for children to try swallowing or stick out their tongues when they brush. I will carry on as long as it does not block me to move 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 she shows 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 her rinse her mouth, pacify her, and let her take a break. After that, I will go on brushing her teeth. Find ways to help her relax, e.g. crack a joke, talk to her, sing a song, play some music or tell a story. Make her feel at ease so that her tongue will relax, then it is high time to brush her teeth!

My son retches whenever I brush his teeth, what can I do to help him?

This is indeed worrying, but it also shows that your child is feeling uncomfortable. Do try to soothe him so that he 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 him rest for a while. Although this will take more time, it is important for you to keep patient when you brush for him.

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 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 had been difficult, and that my dentist introduced me to use dental floss holders. It is much more convenient to clean my child's

teeth with dental floss holders. Sometimes, you may find it rather hard to floss your child's upper teeth, it will be easier if you slightly tilt her head upward.

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

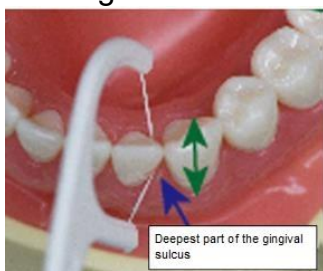
Pull the floss back and forth to slowly slide it between the teeth



Place the floss closely against one of the adjacent tooth surfaces



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

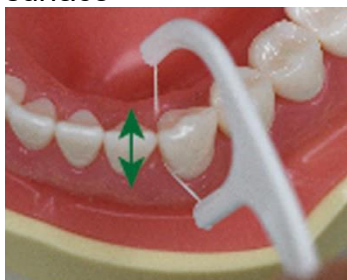


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Place the floss closely against the other adjacent tooth surface



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 her own teeth without your help, and has got used to your cleaning in between her teeth with dental floss holders, you can start teaching her 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 his 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.

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

When I brush my daughter's teeth, her head always moves involuntarily.

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

It is hard to clean the irregular teeth of my daughter.

This problem can be easily solved by picking a toothbrush with a smaller head. Despite that it will take more time to brush, you should clean each and every one of them carefully and patiently.

My son already brushes his teeth every morning and at night, why does he 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 the sugar in the food to 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 and 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.

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You should let your child have breakfast, lunch and dinner at regular times, make sure that he eats a sufficient amount of food during each meal. If he feels hungry between meals, you may give him snacks only once. I understand that children are fond of snacks. You can let him eat them near regular mealtimes. This helps satisfy his craving for snacks, and at the same time, will not increase the risk of tooth decay. Give him water when he is thirsty. If possible, do not let him have other beverages.

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