NHS
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Humber Sensory Processing Service

Community Services for Children aged 0-18 years

Advice for Toothbrushing

Caring, Learning
& Growing Together

Although it's really important to brush your teeth to prevent infection and illness, it can be a tricky task for lots of reasons. For most people it might just feel a bit boring, but when you have sensory differences there are a lot of things to consider, for example, the bristles might feel hard and painful, the toothpaste might taste 'spicy', or the bathroom might be too bright and overwhelming. Toothbrushing also requires a lot of motor skills, including balance, co-ordination, and oral awareness.

Strategies for toothbrushing

- Use a mirror when tooth brushing – you may need a small foot stool for your child to stand on so that they can see in the mirror.
- Trial tooth brushing in an environment where your child feels comfortable, perhaps with a distraction e.g., in front of the TV whilst watching a programme they enjoy, as this may reduce anxiety around tooth brushing. A bathroom can be bright and there are often lots of smells in the bathroom which can be tricky for your child.
- If your child likes being in the bath or shower, they may prefer to brush their teeth during this activity.
- Allow your child to choose a toothbrush which they want to use, such as a fun character toothbrush.
- Try using an electric toothbrush. The vibration can be calming and provides a consistent sensation. However, consider if the vibration is too noisy. Listening to music can help.
- Trial using a flannel with toothpaste on, or a finger brush.
- Try warmer water as cold water can be startling or hurt sensitive teeth.
- Allow your child to hold the toothbrush themselves, holding it close to the bristles can give your child more control.
- If your child dislikes the flavour of toothpaste trial flavourless toothpaste.

- Use a sand timer as a visual cue for how long tooth brushing will last for, this adds predictability to the task, which can be very reassuring. Or there are YouTube videos with character countdowns.
- Introduce a regulating activity before and after tooth brushing, for example a massage or bouncing on a gym ball. Your child could bounce on the ball whilst brushing their teeth.
- Use a chewy tube or chewing on a flannel before tooth brushing, making sure to chew using the molars at the back as well the front teeth, this can build up an awareness of the different teeth in the mouth and where to brush and provide calming deep pressure.
- Your child may need to sit down when tooth brushing if they find balancing and co-ordination difficult.
- Toothbrushing doesn't always have to take place as part of a morning or nighttime routine, try toothbrushing at times when your child is relaxed and regulated.

Oral motor activities

If your child has difficulty with their oral motor sense, they may need to try some proprioceptive activities that focus on using their mouth and jaw muscles. You can try some of the activities listed below to help build their oral awareness and improve their toothbrushing skills.

- Blowing up a balloon or blowing through a straw.
- Wind racing cars or trains across the table.
- Drinking water through a straw.
- Chewy toys, chewable jewellery or chewing on a damp flannel.
- Sour sweets.
- Blowing bubbles.