

How to teach your kids to brush teeth

Teaching brushing basics

By ABBEY WESTBURY | May 26th, 2011 at 10:00 am



If your child is somewhere between having that super-cute gummy smile and a mouthful of baby niblets, you should be brushing his teeth and gums twice a day, every day. Yes, really. While introducing toothbrushing might seem overwhelming, it's really a pretty easy addition to the daily routine. Better yet, it beats baby dentures. But how do you really do it? Try these steps:

Start early

- Use teething to your advantage! Pressing down on those erupting teeth feels good. Let your baby chomp on the toothbrush or massage his gums with the bristles. This will get him comfortable with having the brush in his mouth, and it will save his little fingers (and yours) from bite marks. Even if your little one is still toothless, he will like gnawing on the brush, holding the handle, and trying to mimic you.

Do it the right way, and they will never know how to do it any other way

- Don't just scrape back and forth – hold the brush at a 45(ish) angle and use up/down circular motions, like the wheels of a train. Remember to brush the gums, too. On the backsides of the teeth, you can hold the brush vertically and move it up and down, flicking the brush at the mirror. Make a mess! Alas, you will have to clean it up, but your kid will love it.
- The recommended 2-minute brushing time is an absolute eternity to a little kid and can make brushing seem like a chore. Work your way up to that length of time once you get the mechanics down.
- If your toddler wants to brush his own teeth, take turns. Let him brush on his own once and then do a more thorough second brushing to ensure cleanliness.
- Help the job along by offering “cleansing” snacks during the day. Raw veggies and apples are good at “rinsing” food particles out of teeth.
- Remember, no sugar overnight! If your child must have a bottle in bed, fill it only with water. Enzymes from milk, juice, or formula will hasten tooth decay. You don't want your 3-year-old needing a root canal.

Make brushing something to look forward to

- Sing a happy brushing song. If you can't sing, hum. Certain sounds get their mouths in the right position: “eeeeeeees” (fronts), “aaaaaahhhs” (chewing surfaces and backs), and “eeeeehhhs” (tongue).
- Capitalize on something your child likes and tie it into the action. Fight plaque aliens, debut a pirouette-dancing toothbrush, have a treasure hunt behind the back molars, drive the choo-choo train brush along toothy tracks and into the tunnel.

See a dentist

- Experts say that you should take your child to the dentist within 6 months of his first tooth erupting and definitely before age 2. Your baby's first dentist visit will probably last all of 35 seconds, with the child on your lap and the dentist doing a quick count and check-over. By age 3, your child should go in for regular cleanings twice a year.

Toothbrush

- Make sure your baby's toothbrush has a handle that *you* can comfortably hold, a small, not-pointy head, and very soft bristles. Double check the “ages and stages” range on the package.
- Change toothbrushes often. Because they are so soft, kids' toothbrushes wear out very quickly. When the bristles go flat, get a new one. Better yet, buy several at once and let them “choose” which one they want to use each day.

Toothpaste

- Brushing with only water is fine, but you can use baby-safe toothpaste, too. Make sure that when your child is ready for toothpaste, you get the appropriate kind. Fluoride can be dangerous for very small children, so look for fluoride-free “training toothpaste” for children under 2.
- If your child wants to eat the toothpaste, try these tricks:
 - Use imaginary toothpaste (plain water)
 - Bury the toothpaste in the bristles so he can't suck it out
 - “Chase” the spit down the drain by rinsing with water

Eventually, your child will get the idea. Be patient and keep your own teeth clean in the meantime! Also, bribery can be useful sometimes : as long as you're not using candy.