

SUPPORTING SEND CHILDREN TO LOOK AFTER THEIR TEETH

Practical advice and
tips for parents on
brushing, diet and
visiting the dentist



INTRODUCTION

Good oral health means keeping teeth and gums clean and healthy. This helps prevent issues like tooth decay, gum disease and other infections that can cause pain, difficulty eating and more serious health problems. Maintaining good oral health for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can be especially challenging, not just for the children themselves, but for their parents and carers as well. Healthwatch Oxfordshire worked with families of children with SEND to understand what helps them to look after their children's oral health and what makes this hard. We have produced this leaflet, based on what parents and carers told us, to help address some of the concerns and challenges they raised, and to share some of their tried and tested strategies and tips. We've also included links to other useful sources of information and advice. We really hope this helps support you in managing your child's oral health.

A special thanks to our volunteer Community Connectors, who helped gather insights from parents, and to Community Dental Services CIC for their support with this project and leaflet.

To read our report on children's oral health see <http://www.healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk/report/supporting-childrens-oral-health-july-2024> or scan the QR code



BRUSHING BASICS

WHY DO WE NEED TO BRUSH OUR TEETH?

We brush our teeth to remove a build-up of plaque. This is a soft sticky film of bacteria that constantly forms on our teeth and can cause tooth decay.

WHAT IS THE ADVICE FOR CHILDREN ON BRUSHING TEETH?

Parents are advised to supervise children with their toothbrushing until the age of seven to ensure they are brushing thoroughly.

- Brush twice a day – once before bed and one other time during the day.
- Use a fluoride toothpaste – avoid using a whitening or sensitive toothpaste.
- Use a small-headed, soft/medium-bristled toothbrush.
- Brush gently in a circular motion with the bristles of the toothbrush pointing towards the gums.
- After toothbrushing, spit out excess toothpaste, and do not rinse with water or mouthwash.
- Change toothbrushes every three months, or earlier if the bristles get bent, and following any illness.

HOW MUCH FLUORIDE AND TOOTHPASTE DO CHILDREN NEED?

- 0-3 years: A small smear of toothpaste with at least 1000 ppm (parts per million) fluoride.
- 3-6 years: A pea-sized amount with at least 1000 ppm fluoride.
- 7+ years: A pea-sized amount with 1350-1500 ppm fluoride.

Children are not limited to a certain amount of fluoride in toothpaste – a family toothpaste containing 1350 to 1500 ppm is fine.

If your child is at higher risk for tooth decay, your dentist may suggest higher fluoride toothpaste.

WHY IS IT HARDER FOR CHILDREN WITH SEND TO BRUSH THEIR TEETH?

Sensory sensitivities, motor skill difficulties, or challenges with communication and understanding can make brushing teeth uncomfortable and even overwhelming for children.

We know this can be really hard for parents or carers, but there are things that might help. Over the next couple of pages are some practical tips and strategies for you to try.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on brushing and looking after your child's teeth, including Easy Read guides, see <https://www.communitydentalservices.co.uk/oral-health-improvement/family-fun-information/>

HOW TO MAKE BRUSHING MORE MANAGEABLE

TIP – SET A ROUTINE

Getting into a good routine, and brushing teeth at the same time each day, can be helpful for some children.

- Try involving your child in setting the routine at times that work for them.
- Be realistic about the time you have and what needs to be prioritised.
- Brushing teeth doesn't have to be in the morning – this can often be a tricky time when children may feel tired, sensitive or hesitant.
- But don't forget to always remember to brush teeth before bedtime to avoid bacteria staying in the mouth overnight.
- Try to identify and avoid triggers and try to keep the environment calm
- Keep in mind that routines take time to develop – stick with it!

TIP – FINDING THE RIGHT TOOLS

You might need to try different toothbrushes and toothpastes to find what works best for your child.

Some brushes have wide grips for handling, and others have soft or silicone bristles which might feel less abrasive for children with sensory sensitivities. Mint-flavoured toothpaste might be too strong for some children, who may prefer gentle flavours.

These are some products that some parents have found worked well:

- Collis Curve or Dr Barman's toothbrushes – which are designed to brush all sides of the teeth at once.
- Mild toothpaste – supermarket brands are often milder in taste, are suitable for all the family and are affordable.
- Non-foaming toothpaste, such as Oranurse, is a good option and is ideal for children sensitive to the feeling of foamy toothpaste or those with swallowing difficulties or a strong gag reflex.



For years we struggled with the morning brush. I had no idea that I could brush my child's teeth later in the day. It has been a game-changer!



TIP – START SMALL

Try starting with just a toothbrush to get used to the sensation, then try to introduce a smear of toothpaste and eventually build up to the recommended amount for their age.

TIP – GET A ‘CHEWING BRUSH’

Children can go through brushes very quickly, as they tend to chomp down on the bristles, so they are no longer effective. Having a brush for chewing and one for brushing helps them last longer.

ELECTRIC OR MANUAL?

Both are equally effective if used correctly. Some children will enjoy using an electric toothbrush whereas others might find the sensation uncomfortable. Electric toothbrushes can be used from the age of three.

TIP – HOW TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO OPEN THEIR MOUTH

If your child has difficulty opening their mouth, due to sensory overload or discomfort, you can:

- Gently cradle their head to help.
- Take breaks and consider using a bite block.
- Try brushing when your child is calmer or get a family member to help.

If you have concerns they may be in pain, please consult your dentist.

My son has sensory challenges so brushing can be uncomfortable or it can be pleasant – every day varies





Watching a screen and sitting in a comfortable place while I brush his teeth helps!

TIP – BRUSH OUTSIDE THE BATHROOM

Creating a relaxed environment can make brushing less of a struggle – you don't always have to do it in the bathroom. If you do brush outside the bathroom, you can encourage your child to spit into a napkin or cup.

TIP – TALK IT THROUGH

- Be clear in your explanations about brushing – try using a list or photos to guide the process – and break it down into smaller, manageable steps.
- Try using indirect communication instead of making demands directly. For example, instead of saying “you need to brush your teeth” try “here is your toothbrush, I would be happy to help”.
- Give your child choices to help them feel more empowered and engaged.
- Talk about why brushing teeth is important to help reinforce the routine.

TIP – OTHER THINGS TO TRY

- A timer or song to make brushing for the full two minutes more engaging and familiar.
- Dexterity aids to make the toothbrush easier to hold.
- A reward chart may help track progress and give positive reinforcement.

There are also lots of fun and educational activities, videos and apps to help with reluctant brushers at <http://www.communitydentalservices.co.uk/oral-health-improvement/family-fun-information/> Scan the QR code below.



DIET

WHAT IS THE ADVICE FOR THE BEST DIET TO SUPPORT ORAL HEALTH?

As many children with SEND may struggle with a good brushing routine, it is important to try to reduce sugary snacks and drinks between meals.

- Keep sugary foods as part of their main meal or immediately after as a dessert.
- Between meals try to offer sugar-free snacks, such as whole fruit, vegetables, cheese, crackers, rice cakes, natural yogurt, nuts and seeds.
- Fruit that is cooked, dried or blended is not tooth-friendly and should be kept to mealtimes.
- Stick to water and milk where possible. Any other drinks – even if they are diet, sugar-free, no added sugar or flavoured water – are still acidic. Try to keep other drinks to mealtimes only.

We appreciate that sticking to this advice may not always be practical. Here are some additional ways to help protect your children's teeth:

- Encourage them to use a straw for drinks that are not water or milk.
- Ask the GP for sugar-free alternative medication if your child is on regular medication.
- If your child's diet is high in sugar, your dentist may be able to prescribe a higher fluoride toothpaste. Ask them about this at your next check-up.





**The air-up bottle
was very helpful
for us**

INTRODUCING NEW FOOD

For children with SEND, they often prefer 'safe' foods which are often comforting, predictable and avoid triggering sensory sensitivities. When it comes to expanding their diet, here are some tips:

- Introduce new foods slowly. Taking a gradual and gentle approach to new foods will make it easier for your child to cope with.
- Introduce new foods alongside those your child feels comfortable with.
- Once your child is ready, start introducing snacks that are gentle on their teeth, like whole fruit, cheese or vegetables. Pairing these with safe foods can help ease them into new habits.

DRINKING MORE WATER

Getting children to drink more water can be difficult.

You can try to:

- Offer water or milk throughout the day.
- Offer other drinks with main meals so you know your child is still getting enough fluids.
- Slowly weaken drinks by adding more water each time.
- For those who really dislike water, try using water bottles that are flavoured by scent only.

NHS FOOD SCANNER APP

This is a fun and interactive way to see what is inside your food so you can make healthier choices. It is free to download and great for children, too.

HEALTHY START

If you're more than ten weeks pregnant or have a child under four, you may be entitled to get help to buy healthy food and milk. To check if you're eligible or to find out more see <http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk>

VISITING THE DENTIST

WHAT IS THE ADVICE ABOUT CHILDREN VISITING THE DENTIST?

A child's first dental appointment should be when their first tooth appears, or by their first birthday.

- Children should attend regular dental check-ups.
- NHS dental appointments are free until children turn 18.
- From the age of three, some children are eligible for fluoride varnish during check-ups, which helps protect their teeth.

IF IN DOUBT, GET IT CHECKED OUT!

Children with SEND may find it hard to tell you about pain or problems with their mouth, and they might also be more prone to problems because of the additional challenges they face looking after their teeth.

Pain, swellings, lumps, bumps or patches and loose teeth should be looked at by a dentist straight away.

Look out for signs that your child may be in pain or discomfort, such as:

- A sudden change in behaviour.
- Becoming withdrawn.
- Refusing to eat or drink.
- Pulling at their ears.
- Grimacing or holding their face.

Dentists are trained to support patients and especially children, who find appointments hard, and they will want to help you.

Regular care and support can prevent problems developing and help ensure your child's teeth stay healthy.





Is there anything I can try for our next appointment to make it easier for him? Our last appointment wasn't very successful

HOW TO HELP MAKE VISITS TO THE DENTIST EASIER FOR YOUR CHILD

- Prepare for the visit by role-play, reading books or watching videos about visiting dentists.
- Try to be persistent with regular visits, even if they are hard, to make future appointments easier over time.
- Suggest your child takes something comforting to the appointment, like a soft toy, fidget toy or a weighted blanket.
- Communication with your dentist is key. Let them know if your child does not like bright lights, loud noises or music, so they can make reasonable adjustments.
- Sunglasses to help block out bright lights and headphones to reduce noise could both help reduce sensory overload for your child during the appointment.



MORE INFORMATION

HOW TO FIND AN NHS DENTIST

You can search via your postcode for a local NHS dentist at <http://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist>

If you are struggling to find a dentist or need urgent dental care see <http://www.111.nhs.uk> or call 111.

Some dental practices in Oxfordshire are taking part in a flexible commissioning scheme, to help people who have not attended a dental practice recently or have relocated to the area. For more details about this scheme see <http://www.bucksoxonberksw.icb.nhs.uk/your-health/dentists>

COMMUNITY DENTAL SERVICE

Your child may meet the criteria for special care dentistry. In Oxfordshire this is provided by Thames Valley Community Dental Services. Your dentist or GP can refer you to this service, or you can also self-refer.

Find out more about this service and how to refer at <http://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/tvcds> This website also has lots of useful resources for parents on oral health and visiting dentists.

OXFORDSHIRE ORAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENT TEAM

For a friendly chat, information and support, you can contact your local oral health improvement team.

You can find out more about this service at <http://www.communitydentalservices.co.uk> and can contact your local team by emailing ohimp.oxfordshire@cds-cic.nhs.uk

HEALTHWATCH OXFORDSHIRE

If you would like to share your experiences of using local health and care services, or would like information about services, you can speak to our friendly team.

For more about what we do, go to <http://www.healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk> or you can get in touch with us by phone on 01865 520520 or by email at hello@healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk

