TOOTH BRUSHING

Parents should begin to brush their child’s teeth as soon as the first tooth appears in their child’s mouth. By starting early and when there is only one tooth, the child has time to get used to the experience before it takes longer because there are more teeth.

However, if your child has several teeth (or a full mouth of teeth) and still has difficulty with tooth brushing, know that you are not alone. Tooth brushing can be a difficult task, especially for an individual who has sensitivities to scents, tastes, and textures. Allow your child to choose a kind of toothpaste and the toothbrush he or she wants to use. This allows your child to exert some control over the experience.

Explain why it is important for your child to brush his or her teeth. A simple statement can introduce the topic: “We need to brush teeth to keep our teeth clean and our breath smelling fresh.” Give your child examples:

- Breath usually smells bad after we sleep all night.
- You may not know that your breath smells bad, but people who stand close to you can smell your breath and may back away from you if your breath smells bad.

Your child should brush his or her teeth at least two times a day (morning, after breakfast and night, before bedtime). Ideally, when your child has a full mouth of teeth, he or she should brush for 2 minutes. Use a timer, or sing a favorite song that lasts about that long. This will make it more fun and may also distract him or her from the job.

A softer tooth brush or a brush with a wider handle can help those with sensory or fine motor issues. An electric toothbrush can help with fine motor issues, if it can be tolerated.

Chewable tablets that stain the plaque remaining on teeth after brushing can help
your child visualize what needs to be improved. If your child consistently has difficulty brushing away all the plaque, consider having your child brush his or her teeth more than twice a day — an accommodation that will make up for less than thorough brushing.

After your child is comfortable with tooth brushing, move on to learning to floss and using mouthwash.

As your child becomes more independent, he or she can learn to brush and floss on his or her own. Consider posting a picture schedule or making a Social Story™ to help him or her remember what to do and in what order. Include pictures you take of your child at home.

Be sure to consult with the occupational therapist and speech therapist on your team for help developing a plan for your child.

Related Articles:

- Teaching Your Child Hygiene and Grooming Skills
- Going to the Dentist

Recommended Link:

- CAR Resource Directory (Select Dentists)

Additional Resources:

- Dental Tool Kit, from Autism Speaks®

The Center for Autism Research and The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia do not endorse or recommend any specific person or organization or form of treatment. The information included within the CAR Autism Roadmap & trade; and CAR Resource Directory & trade; should not be considered medical advice and should serve only as a guide to resources publicly and privately available. Choosing a treatment, course of action, and/or a resource is a personal decision, which should take into account each individual's and family's particular circumstances.