

GROWING UP

Ensuring Children Develop a Habit Brushing Their Teeth

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

“Are you sure you brushed your teeth?” the father asked his son. His son solemnly nodded. His father said, “Let me smell your breath.” The son obligingly opened his mouth. Finally, the father said, “I need to check and see if your toothbrush is wet.”

This type of exchange happens in many households as children often do not brush their teeth, even when told to do so. This nightly inquisition can occur less frequently if parents establish a habit in their children to brush their teeth.

All habits require doing something over and over again until it reaches a point where an action can be done without thinking about it. One example is putting on a seat belt when getting into a car. When parents have their children put on their seatbelts every time they get in the car, the children soon put on their seatbelts without having to be reminded. In this case, a seat belt habit has been established. While putting on a seatbelt is a relatively easy action to do, brushing teeth is more complex and will likely take a bit longer to firmly establish as a habit.

Children should brush their teeth at least twice a day, usually in the morning and before bed. This can be viewed as a chore by children so parents need to try and make it fun. One way to make it fun is to let children pick out their own toothbrushes and toothpastes. There are a lot of child oriented products available although parents should make sure that all toothbrushes are soft-bristled and that the toothpaste carries the American Dental Association (ADA) Seal of Approval. Once the toothbrushes and toothpastes are selected, it is time to establish a habit.

While parents are encouraged to brush their infants and toddlers’ teeth, it is not until children reach five or six years old that they are ready to brush their teeth on their own. To make sure children are ready, parents should model brushing their own teeth in front of the children and describe what they are doing. This can be done by drawing attention to brushing the biting teeth (chewing surface), smiling teeth (front teeth), and tricky teeth (teeth in back of mouth). A timer can be used during this time to show children that they should brush their teeth for at least two minutes. Sometimes a song can be created to help children keep track of how long to brush. After finishing, parents should show children how to appropriately spit out the toothpaste and rinse.

As children start brushing their teeth, parents should go through the same steps they used when modeling brushing their own teeth. Once children have finished brushing, parents should “check out” their work. This gives parents some time to touch up any spots children might have missed. When children have finished brushing, parents should acknowledge the good effort they made and talk about how their teeth are now “ready for the day” or “ready to go to bed.”

Repeating the routine over several weeks will get children into the habit of brushing their teeth so that parents will not have to interrogate them every night before bed about whether they

brushed their teeth or not. This habit will carry over into a lifelong benefit as good oral hygiene ensures fewer cavities, better breath, and healthier gums. So grab a toothbrush and get that good habit started!

Biography:

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