

Toothbrushing & Sensory Needs

For some children the stimulation from toothbrushing and flossing can be overwhelming and difficult to tolerate.



Below are some tips to help you and your child **succeed with dental care.**

Touch

- Does your child dislike the toothbrush or toothpaste texture?
- Are the bristles soft, or is the toothpaste foamy?
- Does your child like the tap water, or is it too cold?
- Is the bathroom overwhelming—cold tiles or no mat?



Strategies: Use softer or electric toothbrushes for vibration. Try a sensory friendly toothbrush. Try non-foaming or unflavored toothpaste, use warm water instead of cold, and have your child wear socks or shoes in the bathroom to avoid cold floors.

Vision

- Does your child like their toothbrush?
- Is the bathroom cluttered or too brightly lit?



Strategies: Let your child pick a toothbrush with their favorite character. Also, keep the bathroom tidy and reduce the lighting.

Noise

- Is your child using an electric toothbrush? Can they tolerate the noise?
- Are there other bathroom noises? Bathrooms can echo and amplify sounds like extractor fans, running water, showers, flushing toilets, closing cabinet doors, and outside noises from open windows.



Strategies: Use a standard toothbrush instead of an electric one. Make sure the bathroom is quiet and secure. Closing windows to reduce noise. Play calming music your child likes.

Taste

- Does your child like the flavor of the toothpaste?



Strategies: Try using unflavored and unscented toothpaste. Try using a few different toothpaste brands (e.g. travel sized tubes to keep waste and cost down). Keep in mind the flavor 'mint' can taste differently depending on the brand of toothpaste you use.

Balance and Equilibrium

- How is your child positioned during toothbrushing? If standing, do they hold onto something?
- Does your child feel unsteady while brushing? Are they standing or would they prefer to sit? Would they like to hold onto something?
- Is the sink easy to reach? Some children may feel unsteady or fearful of losing balance, especially if they're uncomfortable with movement like swings or slides.



Strategies: Offer a chair, stool, or toilet to sit on. Encourage holding onto the sink. Place a mirror so they can see themselves brushing for comfort and reassurance.

Body Awareness and Proprioception

- Is your child getting enough input during toothbrushing?
- Is your child pressing too little or too much?



Strategies: Use an electric toothbrush for vibration and sensory input; “warm up” their body with deep pressure or big squeezes on arms, legs, or shoulders. Try making circular motions on their cheeks and around their mouth or gently rub a soft washcloth near their lips and gums to help desensitize the area.

Smell



- Does the toothpaste have a strong smell?
- Bathrooms often have odors like air fresheners or toilet detergents that might be unpleasant or hard for your child to tolerate.

Strategies: Try different toothpastes and minimize strong bathroom smells by using fragrance-free soaps and cleaning products. Let your child choose an air freshener they like and stick to one familiar scent to make it predictable. Also, flush the toilet promptly to avoid unpleasant odors.

Other Strategies to Try

- Brush your child's teeth in a comfortable setting, like while they watch a favorite TV show, to reduce anxiety.
- Let your child hold the toothbrush near the bristles for better control.
- Have your child use their finger to brush their teeth.
- Use a timer to show how long brushing will last, adding predictability.
- Use a chewy tube before brushing to help your child become aware of their teeth and where to brush.





Brush, Book, Bed

American Academy of Pediatrics,
recommends this simple ritual at the
end of the day:

1. Each night, help your children to
floss and brush their teeth
2. **Read a favorite book** (or two)!
3. **Get to bed at a regular time each
night.**

Source American Academy of Pediatrics (Copyright @ 2024)

Play Elmo's "Brushy Brush" Song



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