

Brushing Teeth

Sensory processing differences may contribute to difficulties cleaning our teeth. We process many sensory experiences during teeth brushing such as:

- The taste of toothpaste.
- The texture of the brush.
- Visual input from mirrors which could be overwhelming or distracting.
- Vibrations and noise from an electric brush.
- Navigating how to move the brush in our mouth and judge the appropriate force needed.

The following ideas are designed to help address these challenges. When using them, consider your child's age, any potential risks, and their sensory preferences. Reflect on how to adapt these strategies to best support your child in feeling calm and relaxed during teeth brushing.

If you are concerned about your child's dental health or oral hygiene please contact your dentist. If you do not have a dentist, please contact your health visitor or search for [local ones here](#).

Area of difficulty	Strategy	Tick when strategy has been tried and add comments
Child becomes easily distracted or overwhelmed by their environment whilst cleaning their teeth.	Complete the tasks below in a low distraction environment, this does not need to be in the bathroom.	
	Remove bath toys, bottles etc from view. Pull shower curtains across to reduce visual distractions such as multiple bottles or toys on bath edge.	
	Consider if it would be preferable for your child to listen to music of their choosing. This may block out other distracting noises and/or provide structure.	
	Consider the use of a mirror: for some children this can help them focus on the task, encourage them to look at themselves and where the brush is moving. Try to block out reflections, for example closing doors onto landings, blocking the view out a window. For some children the use of a mirror may be too distracting, and they may benefit from looking directly at an adult modelling the task.	
	Trial a visual/audio timer or consider a visual schedule to prompt them of each stage of teeth brushing to help them re-focus.	

	Consider if they are sensitive to certain smells in the bathroom (e.g. strong cleaning products) and if they can choose alternative scents that they prefer (e.g. air fresheners and hand soaps).	
	Use rewards and motivators to encourage engagement for example see: Visual Reward Chart	
	Heavy work tasks prior to teeth brushing helps 'wake up' the muscles and joints helping the brain know where the body is in space. This also has a lasting calming and organising effect. Heavy work tasks could include carrying the shopping, sweeping, hoovering, playing games with weighted objects. More examples can be found here Heavy Work Activities heavy-muscle-work-activities.pdf	
Child is sensitive to the taste or texture of toothpaste/toothbrush.	Try alternative flavours and textures of toothpastes: There are many different types available such as Oranurse Non foaming toothpaste. Available at: Unflavoured Toothpaste – oraNurse	
	Prepare the mouth for the activity: Have a cold drink of water, massage the cheeks, pull funny faces in a mirror stretching the muscles and skin. Consider the use of chew toys.	
	Start small - time: Initially only expect a short period of time brushing with a toothbrush, build up the time slowly over repeated sessions.	
	Start small - paste: Initially use only a tiny amount of paste and build up slowly over repeated sessions.	
	Use favourable smells such as an air freshener, spray or spritz prior to brushing.	
	Trial dissolvable toothpaste tablets.	
	Plaque buildup can still be prevented by just brushing the teeth with water on the toothbrush. The use of fluoride mouthwash afterwards can also help prevent tooth decay.	
	Use warm water, this is likely to have a more calming effect on their nervous system.	

Child has difficulty planning the movement or force of the brush in their mouth	Practice on toys: such as Play Doh-Drill 'n' Fill dentist game. Build an agreed language about brushing at the back, front, left, right, top, bottom. This helps when completing the task in real life, the verbal directions given are consistent and have been practised.	
	Heavy work tasks prior to teeth brushing (see above).	
	Offer hand over hand support to help your child 'feel' how much pressure to apply.	
	Use a toothbrush with a chunky handle: this makes it easier to be held.	
	Engage in motor skills games: Encourage your child to engage in fine and gross motor games and activities which raise their awareness of where their body is in space. For ideas to support this see Worksheet D-Fine Motor Skills in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Pre-school Resource Pack' on our website.	
	If your child experiences distress from other factors such as the taste of toothpaste, practice the movements needed to brush the teeth using only water.	
	Use a 3-sided toothbrush. This helps a more thorough clean with less co-ordination of movement required. These are available at places like www.sensodyne.co.uk www.drbarbans.com	
	See Worksheet L-Teeth Brushing in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Motor Skills Resource Pack' on our website.	
Child finds the noise of the toothbrush overwhelming.	Incorporate 'pressure games' into play: Encourage games where you can visualise the difference between hard and soft for example squeezing Play Doh firmly or softly, colouring hard of soft. Help your child to notice and verbalise what pressure they are using.	
	Use a manual brush. Play other favourable music or noises: these could also act as a countdown for your child to know how long the brushing will last. Consider using the "brush DJ" app to support this. Available at: Brush DJ	

	Make it fun and try using other distractions such as reading a book, or using alternative apps whilst brushing teeth.	
	If using an electric toothbrush, start slowly and build up tolerance: Your child may need to be around others using a brush first. Teach your child how to turn the toothbrush on and off, out of the mouth. Have small expectations of the brush being in your child's mouth and slowly increase.	
	Use a toothbrush with a timer built in.	
Child has difficulty staying still for the task.	Place a marker on the floor: This provides a visual guide to remind your child where to stand. Help them notice when they have left the marker.	
	Stand on a wobble cushion: This can be useful for children who seek movement, however, will add more challenge to their motor skills. A standard cushion could be used for a gentle balance challenge.	
	Sit down: Use the toilet seat to sit on during the task, ensure feet can reach the floor or a small step to provide stability and security whilst they sit.	
	Heavy work tasks prior to teeth brushing to prepare the body and muscles to stand still and focus for example see: Heavy Work Activities heavy-muscle-work-activities.pdf	
Child rushes through the task	Use countdowns: Verbal, visual or noise countdowns can be useful (think about your child's sensory preferences and which they may engage with best). For further information on specific countdown tools, see page four of Worksheet B-Attention and Focus in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Pre-School Resource Pack' on our website.	
	Encourage 'your turn, my turn': this enables you to slow the process down on 'your turn' and encourage slower pace in your child's turn.	
	Encourage calming activities prior to teeth cleaning: for example, breathing and grounding activities. For some ideas see Breathing Exercises for children.	
Child becomes upset before beginning to start the task	Plan in routine: Keep a predictable routine of when teeth brushing will be done. Use visual cues to help the child know what is coming and what is expected.	

	Model teeth cleaning: Encourage your child to 'help' you clean your teeth. For example, adding paste to the brush, counting down time, directing where to brush.	
	Avoid grouping stressful tasks: Brush teeth at a different time to other personal care tasks which might be stressful for your child such as hair brushing or getting dressed. Some children feel calmest when they are in the bath, this may be a time to introduce the task.	
	Rewards can be useful to encourage your child's engagement. Initially keep expectations small thus more achievable. For example, 5 seconds of the brush in the mouth may reach the reward. Increase time slowly. "Now and next" cards could be used as a strategy to support this. See Worksheet B-Attention and Focus in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Pre-School Resource Pack' on our website.	
	Offering choices can also be useful as it allows your child to make choices about their teeth brushing routine. They could choose the flavour of toothpaste or pick a toothbrush with their favourite colour or character. They could also be responsible for picking the song to brush their teeth to.	
	Use calming activities prior to teeth brushing: Some children find heavy work tasks calming and organising. Others may find engaging in mindfulness, or breathing exercises useful (See the above examples for ideas).	
	Create a visual guide or social story™ to help your child understand why we need to clean our teeth. Further information on social stories™ available at: Social Stories - Carol Gray (carolgraysocialstories.com)	
Child's cleaning process is ineffective	Encouraging your child to practice: 'Your turn my turn' approach can be useful. Avoid forcing your child to stay still or clean teeth when they experience distress. If using a countdown, allow your child to take a break and pause the countdown until they return. Be persistent with them returning to finish the entire countdown.	
	Use rewards and motivators to encourage engagement (see above examples for ideas).	
	Use social stories™: These can help your child understand why we need to clean our teeth and the consequences of not looking after our teeth. Further information on social stories™ available at: Social Stories - Carol Gray - Social Stories (carolgraysocialstories.com)	

	Use visual timers or apps to make it fun and engaging.	
	Trial a vibrating toothbrush, this may provide sensory input that can help your child be more aware of the position of the brush.	
Things to consider when going to the dentist	Help prepare your child by showing pictures or videos of what to expect at the dentist.	
	Inform your dentist prior to the appointment that your child may require a sensory friendly approach.	
	Where possible, assist your child in becoming used to the dentist and the environment by visiting. Gradual, multiple visits may be required before your child may feel comfortable.	
	During the appointment provide a comfort toy or distractions.	
	Praise your child using a reward or celebration so they look forward to their next visit.	
	See Attending appointments.docx in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Sensory Resource Pack' on our website for further details.	

Useful resources:

NHS guidance for mouth care products: [Product Flip Chart \(england.nhs.uk\)](#)

NHS guidance for Children's oral health care: [Children's teeth - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

NHS guidance for oral health care for people with additional needs: [Dental treatment for people with special needs - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

NHS England dental passport: [Dental Passport \(england.nhs.uk\)](#)

National Autistic Society: Going to the Dentist - A guide for parents and family
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/going-to-the-dentist/parents>