

Children's Early Years Occupational Therapy Service



Tooth brushing and Oral Care

Advice and strategies for
Parents/Guardians

Tooth Brushing and Oral Care for children with sensory processing difficulties

Tooth brushing and visiting the dentist can be challenging and distressing for both the child and the family. This handout is designed to give you both practical ideas well as strategies to support those more sensory seeking/avoidant children.

Important considerations before trying these strategies

It is important to consider if there are any medical causes for oral sensitivity. Worn down enamel, infections, cavities or sore gums for example would cause pain, discomfort and avoidance of oral care activities so always consult with your dentist if you are unsure or suspect something is wrong.

Practical Ideas

1) Try a variety of brushes to find the preference for your child. Some children find soft bristle's easier than hard bristles, some prefer electric toothbrushes over manual ones, some people have found success with a double or 4 sided toothbrush. Try letting your little one choose their own toothbrush with their favourite character or colour.



2) Be aware that some toothpaste can be very strong in flavour and smell. Try alternative toothpastes like strawberry or blueberry or non-flavoured toothpaste. Some children dislike the sensation of toothpaste foaming up in their mouth. Consider exploring different toothpaste textures such as gel or paste.

3) Use visual aids and social stories to increase understanding of the task so that your child knows what is going to happen. Including tooth brushing as part of an evening and morning visual timetable will make the task an expected part of the normal routine.

4) Try using songs related to tooth brushing, for example "this is the way we brush our teeth, brush our teeth...." Alternatively try earphones/earplugs/Ipod/tablet with their favourite music or show, just for toothbrush time if that makes it easier and less demanding for your child.

5) Give definite time limits to the task (e.g. "Let's count to 10. Then we will stop brushing your teeth"). Alternatively consider using use a sand timer or other visual aid.



6) Consider using distractions for example giving your child a fidget to interact with.

- 7) Massage around your child's mouth and jaw prior to brushing if tolerated. Using a warm face cloth may help relax the child's facial muscles and reduce sensitivity.
- 8) Have your child wear a heavy neck wrap or towel during the tooth brushing activity to help calm and regulate them.
- 9) Deep pressure and movement can be calming to the nervous system prior to tooth brushing. For further detail and information on what activities to utilise please see 'making sense of sensory behaviours'
- 10) Enable your child to feel more stable and secure during this activity by sitting them on a small chair with their feet supported.
- 11) Offer safe non-toxic mouth fidgets eg: tethers of chew toys throughout the day provide more exposure to oral sensory input and reduce sensitivity.