

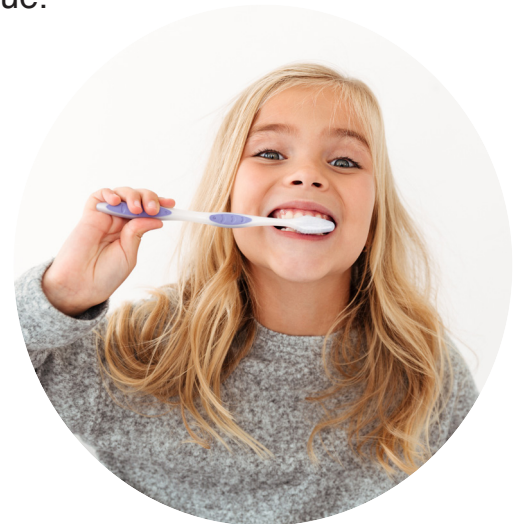
# Tooth brushing

## Children's Therapy Services Patient Information

Many children find having their teeth brushed very difficult. You may see a variety of behaviours to communicate this, including screaming, tantrums, clamping their mouth shut, running off, covering their head with hands, and pushing arms away that come near their heads. This can be for a variety of reasons including:

### Sensitivity to touch

- The feel of the toothbrush bristles on their gums and tongue.
- The feel of someone supporting their head to brush their teeth.
- Unexpected touch, e.g. if suddenly approached from behind with a toothbrush.
- Trigger of gag reflex if toothbrush is too far back.
- Sensitivity to vibration if using electric toothbrush.
- The supporting adult brushing against their skin.



### Sound sensitivity

- The sound of teeth being brushed may be louder in their own head.
- The sound of an electric toothbrush, if used.

### Taste and smell sensitivity

- Overwhelming flavour of toothpaste.
- Strong smell of toothpaste.
- The smell of the supporting adult in close proximity (e.g. coffee breath!).

### Other difficulties

- Lack of control having something 'done to them' in very close personal space.

# Tooth brushing tips

Below are some ideas and tips to try that may help tooth brushing to be less stressful:

- ✓ Make sure your child is visually warned that it is time to brush teeth. Give a few minutes warning and give them time to respond. Make this a part of their daily routine, so it is a predictable event.
- ✓ Use firm pressure - provide firm pressure when brushing your child's teeth, some children are very sensitive to light touch on their teeth, and this may be why they avoid having their teeth brushed.
- ✓ Some children prefer an electric toothbrush to help them tolerate the sensation - this gives deeper touch input into the jaw than a regular toothbrush and is less 'tickly' for some children.
- ✓ Two or three sided toothbrushes are available to help minimise the time spent brushing teeth by cleaning the tops and sides of teeth at the same time.
- ✓ Try unflavoured toothpaste (e.g. Ora Nurse) or experiment with different flavours - mint can be very strong and unpleasant for a child who is sensitive to taste. Allow your child to taste test the toothpaste before having their teeth brushed.
- ✓ Sometimes warm water rather than cold can help children tolerate tooth brushing.
- ✓ Your child could pick a special toothbrush and toothpaste to help make it more exciting.
- ✓ Your child can play with the toothbrush and toothpaste outside of tooth brushing time - work on your child tolerating putting the toothbrush in their mouth without toothpaste and work slowly on increasing what they can do.
- ✓ Listening to music or singing can help drown out unwanted sounds and distract your child. Some parents find a tooth brushing song helps - make sure you are finished brushing their teeth in time for the end of the song! Some children find the time limited nature helps - sand timers can also be used for children to be able to count down when this activity is ending.
- ✓ Have a mirror in front of your child so they can see what is going on.
- ✓ Social stories about why we need to brush teeth can work for some children. Take photos of your child and their toothpaste, toothbrush, and bathroom and make a little story about this use a resource such as 'the new social story book' by Carol Gray to help structure your story.
- ✓ Toothbrush apps for smart phones are now available which helps motivate some children e.g. aqua fresh brush time - a tooth brushing song where you earn points towards costume parts to dress up the character.
- ✓ Some children find applying firm pressure/rubbing around the jaw area before teeth cleaning helps them to tolerate the sensation better.



- ✓ Try to encourage your child to be as independent as possible with teeth brushing - this may be that they brush for the first bit, and you help finish off. You can also use hand over hand - your child holds the toothbrush then you can use your hand to guide it round their mouth.
- ✓ Think about environments where your child is comfortable. They don't have to be in the bathroom to brush their teeth - you can have a cup to spit out toothpaste in.
- ✓ Breaking down the task into a visual timetable can help. Steps can be typed onto a sheet with a square of Velcro next to each - a Velcro tick can be put onto each step once completed. Steps can be graded to as small a step, or as big, as your child can understand. An example of this would be:
  1. Pick up the toothbrush.
  2. Turn on the water.
  3. Run the toothbrush under the water.
  4. Take the cap off the toothpaste.
  5. Put the cap on the side of the sink.
  6. Put toothpaste onto the brush.
  7. Brush sides, back, and front of teeth.
  8. Spit out the toothpaste.
  9. Rinse the toothbrush under the tap.
  10. Turn off the water.
  11. Place the cap back onto the toothpaste.
  12. Put the toothbrush away.

We hope this information has been helpful. There is also further support for children with disabilities available through the specialist dentist service. A health professional or your dentist can refer your child to them for further support. More information can be found here [www.somersetft.nhs.uk/dental-services](http://www.somersetft.nhs.uk/dental-services)

## Contact details




### Children's therapy services

Telephone number: **0300 019 2936**, Monday to Friday, 8am-5pm

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