

# Toothbrushing – what do parents think?

This article considers psychological factors that may influence what parents believe and do in relation to brushing their children's teeth and how an insight into these factors can be helpful in delivering oral health education

Dental professionals are well versed in the technicalities of what parents need to know when it comes to brushing children's teeth or getting children to brush their own teeth. But as the accompanying article demonstrates, this daily activity can be a battle, be a chore. We do not know enough about the psychology of this process nor what parents really think when it comes to cleaning their off-spring's teeth. In this brief article I am going to discuss three aspects of thinking and how they might be harnessed to ensure twice daily brushing.

## What do parents think other parents do?

In a number of areas of health education, it has been shown that how often people engage in a particular activity (either positive or negative as far as their health is concerned), is influenced by what they think their peers do – "social norms" to use the jargon. When we surveyed parents of 5-year-olds living in areas of social and economic deprivation, we asked (i) how often they brushed their children's teeth, and (ii) how often they thought other people in their street brushed their children's teeth.

We found that one third of parents substantially underestimated how often they thought other parents brushed their children's teeth, compared with what other parents reported they did. Furthermore, those parents who underestimated the average reported brushing frequency of their neighbours, were themselves more likely to report a reduced frequency of brushing of their own children's teeth. This suggests that parents are indeed influenced by what they think other parents do.

Social normative interventions have been very successful in other areas of health education. So next time you are discussing toothbrushing frequency, rather than saying, "you should brush your child's teeth twice a day" it may be more persuasive to say, "most other parents brush their children's teeth twice a day".

## What do parents think about the benefits of toothbrushing?

People are motivated to engage in health promoting behaviours for many reasons. In the case of parents being encouraged to brush their children's teeth, the dental profession has traditionally focused on the benefits of decay prevention, de and remineralisation, things to be aspired to in the future – rather than the immediate concern of sending your child to school with smelly breath. The cosmetic and social element of tooth brushing is something that has received considerable attention in oral health promotion for adults themselves – but it is these same adults that have influence and control over brushing their children's teeth. Our research with parents of children living in deprived circumstances found that parents were focused on making sure their children's teeth looked nice, that they

had fresh breath and the knock-on effect was that parents were more likely to brush their children's teeth in the morning than at night – arguably the time when most benefit is to be derived from having an increased intra-oral fluoride reservoir.

We explored this in some detail as follows. We told parents to imagine that there were two fictional ingredients in a toothpaste called "Fresh" and "Health". The fresh ingredient makes your breath smell good, gives you nice shiny, clean teeth but does absolutely nothing else, no health benefits. The health ingredient stops you getting tooth decay but does nothing else. We asked parents to choose between five toothpastes that they would use for brushing their child's teeth in the morning and in the evening. These toothpastes had different amounts of each of those two ingredients – they could have all Fresh, all Health, or somewhere in the middle. The question as posed to the parents is illustrated in Figure 1.



FIGURE 1

As illustrated in Figure 2, what we found was that parents' preference for "Fresh" versus "Health" varied between morning and evening brushing. Only 17% of respondents choose the toothpaste with only the "Health" ingredient in the morning (i.e., 0% Fresh in Figure 2), compared with 41% who choose the purely "Health" toothpaste in the evening (Figure 2).

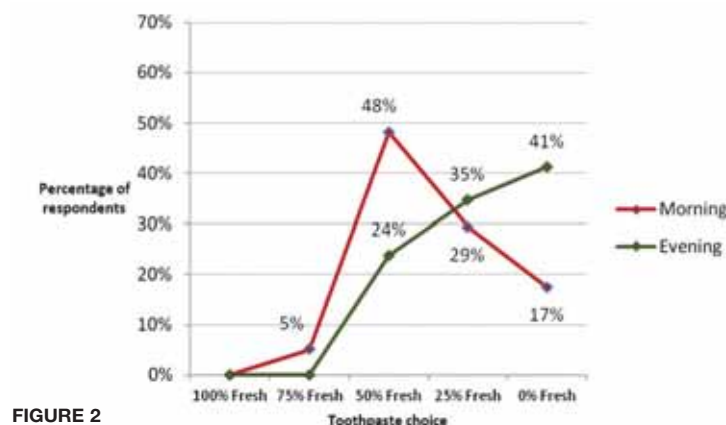


FIGURE 2

We believe that the take home message here is that in discussing toothbrushing with the parents of young children, the "social" benefits of promoting toothpaste should be part of the conversation as well as the ultimate goal of preventing cavities.

## Fast and slow thinking

Automaticity is a concept that has gained widespread attention due to the best-selling "Thinking fast and slow" by Daniel Kahneman. This is the concept that many things in life we learn to do without having to think about them. If you are reading this in work, how much do you remember about your journey to work this morning? How much did you have to think about it? That font of all knowledge, Wikipedia, defines automaticity as "the ability to do things without occupying the mind with the low-level details required, allowing it to become an automatic response pattern or habit. It is usually the result of learning, repetition, and practice". That is what we really want to happen with brushing children's teeth – it should be a matter of habit and routine.

We spoke to a mix of parents, some who brushed their children's teeth twice a day without fail, some who maybe did it once a day, and some who did it very rarely. One of the really clear differences

was tired, or tea was late. They said things like "It's a constant battle really – she always tries to get out of it"; "Some nights we do it – but it's so busy after school some days"; "No, it's definitely not something he does on his own – I have to remind him to brush every day!".

We went on to use a measure via a specifically designed questionnaire which classified families into those whose morning and evening routines were predictable and routine and those where chaos reigned. Unsurprisingly, reported toothbrushing frequency was much higher when done at the same time every day. Clearly being totally prescriptive about when to brush cannot be within the dental professional's remit and is undesirable, but the development of a routine should be encouraged.

Constraints of space limit what I can say about our work on parents' thinking when it comes to toothbrushing, but if you are interested in finding out more, the details are in the following references.

## Summary

Tooth brushing is fundamental to a child's oral health, and the ideal outcome is to establish a habitual behaviour, whereby brushing both morning and evening becomes part of the normal 'routine'.

As dental professionals the act of simply 'instructing' parents to brush their child's teeth twice daily may not be sufficient. Lessons should be drawn from other areas of health education, and an understanding of parents' motivations established. This should allow us to better understand how to support the parents in the goal of establishing that brushing routine.

## References

- Trubey RJ, Moore SC, Chestnutt IG. 2014. Parents' reasons for brushing or not brushing their child's teeth: A qualitative study. *Int J Paediatr Dent.* 24(2):104-112.
- Trubey RJ, Moore SC, Chestnutt IG. 2015a. The association between parents' perceived social norms for toothbrushing and the frequency with which they report brushing their child's teeth. *Community Dent Health.* 32(2):98-103.
- Trubey RJ, Moore SC, Chestnutt IG. 2015b. Children's toothbrushing frequency: The influence of parents' rationale for brushing, habits and family routines. *Caries Res.* 49(2):157-164.
- Trubey RJ, Moore SC, Chestnutt IG. 2017. Parental decisions about children's oral health behaviour: Relative or absolute? *Community Dent Oral Epidemiol.* 45(1):35-42. ■

**About the author**  
**Ivor Chestnutt,**  
**Professor and Hon**  
**Consultant in Dental**  
**Public Health,**  
**Cardiff University**  
**School of Dentistry**

