

The confession of a dentist whose child won't brush their teeth

This is a subjective, opinion article and I do not claim to be an expert in paediatric dentistry. However, as a dentist who dabbles in research, I can safely categorise my knowledge/opinion of good oral care in babies and toddlers into two stages – **before** I had my first child and **after**

Pre-children, exasperated parents in practice would ask me for tips on how to get their child to allow them to brush their teeth. I would ream off taught knowledge, calmly stating to introduce the toothbrush as early as possible, make it a game, play their favourite song, let them see you or older siblings do it so they can mirror the behaviour. And of course, that it was important to brush last thing at night with only water after. Incorporate this and one other brush time into your daily routine and eventually they will get used to it.

Looking back, I realise the underlying, patronising undertone of this was "try harder".

There is nothing like actual experience to show you how little you know. I didn't realise that the parents here in my surgery were the ones who had already been converted. These were the ones who knew the importance of oral hygiene and visits to the dentists – they were trying their best. What they were looking for was hope, that it would get easier, not generic advice that they had probably already seen on the internet and could have spouted back to me.

Dental Science in general is quite under-researched. Infant oral hygiene is no exception. When I look at data on other aspects of infant health, I feel a bit let down by my profession. For example, when you look at infant sleep literature, there is an inverse linear relationship between number of nightly wake ups and increasing age in months, with an average 1.83 night wakings (standard deviation of 1 wake up on either side) at the age of 0-2 months, dropping below one wake up at 12-17 months. This is hope. You still have a range of behaviour from babies, some of whom sleep through from 6 weeks, others will still make their way into their parents' bed as they attend school. However, there are evidence-based techniques that you know will help you achieve a quantifiable outcome.



There is no dental literature for when toothbrushing will get easier. We have literature on why parents don't brush their children's teeth¹ (spoiler alert: because it is hard and takes sustained time, energy, and patience when you are exhausted), educating parent groups and educating health care visitors but no good research on questions like "toothbrushing acceptance behaviour amongst infants aged 6-36 months". There are published guidance from public health authorities and dental paediatric associations but no useful data stating when you practice this technique twice a day for every day then it is X% more likely that your infant will let you brush their teeth without a substantial fight by 18 months. I have been brushing my child's teeth since he was 6 months old, twice every day (practically). Still, at 14 months, he won't let me in to do a good job without me holding his head and pinning his arms so he can't swat me away. This is published nowhere, not in any guidance or in any paper.

If I was not a dental health care professional, I would worry if I was doing it wrong, if I was hurting him or if I was forming long term psychological trauma by pinning him down to brush his teeth. After months of persisting, I know I am not. His gums are healthy, he will happily pick up the toothbrush himself and chew on it, he brushes his teddy's teeth and he will happily brush my teeth. Still, under no circumstances will he let me in to his mouth to do what I need to do without some form of duress.

We know that getting the right advice can be hard, attempting behaviour change is harder and then persisting through challenges with that behaviour change is a battle. How do we expect to get parents on board when we are not recognising that, for some at least, healthy brushing habits takes a highly sustained effort and dedicated routine over years? My questions were more along the lines of "when singing songs and mirroring fails, do you force them to do it and risk connecting toothbrushing with duress?" and "What is the bare minimum you can do while they get used to the fact toothbrushing is here to stay?".

I am doing the best I can and still feel like I'm not winning. I am however relieved by one piece of evidence and one subjective observation. Firstly, children rarely get periodontal disease so if oral hygiene is not optimal every single time, as long as you are controlling sugar in the diet, it is unlikely that you will do lasting damage. This is not a 'get out of jail free' card as little ones can get gingivitis and bleeding gums. However, it did reduce my guilt when I had an exhausting day and, just tonight, I was going to let the little one away with chewing on their toothbrush instead of a fight. The second observation is that I did not cause lasting damage by pinning him down to



brush his teeth twice a day. He still fights it when I do it but afterwards will happily play with his toothbrush in his mouth. This is very similar to the fights/protests I have when I try and spoon feed him versus his happiness when he is able to try and get the spoon in his own mouth. If I completely left him to his own devices he would have more food in his ear than stomach. Fortunately, he gets 'hangry' and comes back for more. Unfortunately teeth don't get angry at plaque and if I left him to do his own toothbrushing, I would be left with frayed toothbrush bristles, lots of plaque, and worn incisors from chewing on the brush. However, we are learning together. It's all a journey and I for one have stopped giving out generic advice and emphasised to parents that it is hard, I'll show you the technique, but do the job as best as you can and don't give up. I don't know when it will get easier, but I do know that I'm not causing damage and I'm helping my little one to develop good routines. Then, dental science wins and we finally have some good data showing that good routines do help to improve oral hygiene.²

As dental professionals we should recognise that brushing a child's teeth is not an exact 'science' in the real world. Parents asking advice and attending the dental surgery are often doing the best

they can but need a bit of encouragement. We need to remind them that it's a journey that may take some time, but not to beat themselves up when they don't achieve the prescribed two minutes, twice a day. And most of all to remind them, it will get easier!

References

1. R.J. Trubey, S.C. Moore, I.G. Chestnutt, Parents' reasons for brushing or not brushing their child's teeth: A qualitative study, *Int. J. Paediatr. Dent.* 24 (2014) 104–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ipd.12034>.
2. R.J. Trubey, S.C. Moore, I.G. Chestnutt, Children's toothbrushing frequency: The influence of parents' rationale for brushing, habits and family routines, *Caries Res.* 49 (2015) 157–164. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000365152>. ■

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