Toothbrush Tolerance

Dentists recommend children be actively supervised when brushing their teeth until 7-8 years of age. Some children may require assistance longer. The purpose of this resource is to assist parents and caregivers in helping their children become more comfortable brushing their teeth or having their teeth brushed. Consider a gradual approach as described below. This resource may be especially helpful for children with sensory sensitivities.

1. Start by providing gentle pressure to the back of their child's head for five seconds and repeat that three times. Try this 3-5 per day, preferably in the space where your child will brush their teeth.

2. While most people brush their teeth in their bathroom, you may choose to perform the activity in another area of the home where your child feels more comfortable.

3. Once your child is comfortable with pressure on the back of their head, begin to extend the routine by applying pressure to other areas of their head and face, such as below the ear and lower cheekbone. Apply deep sweeping motions from the ear to the chin with your hands.

4. Apply pressure to the lower and upper lip and upper cheekbones with your hands.

5. Repeat the above pressure routine using a warm washcloth instead of your hands. While doing this, encourage your child to allow you to touch their teeth with the washcloth.

6. Once your child is comfortable with the washcloth touching their teeth, introduce a soft-bristled toothbrush without any toothpaste.

7. When your child is ready for toothpaste, use only a pea-sized amount.

It may also be helpful to show your child how you brush your own teeth or even brush along with them. It is important to remember that every child will have his or her own timeline for mastering each skill and feeling comfortable brushing their teeth on their own. Go slow! If the child starts to show signs of agitation, stop and take a break. Go back to a step the child can tolerate. Brushing should not be a negative experience.

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