

Parent Tip Sheet for Teeth Brushing: Supporting Children with Sensory processing challenges

Brushing teeth can be challenging for children with sensory processing difficulties. Here are strategies to make the experience more positive and manageable:

1) Build Comfort and Familiarity

- **Play-based exploration:**
 - o Encourage your child to play with the toothbrush outside of the brushing routine. They can pretend to brush a dolls or stuffed animal's teeth.
 - o Let them hold, touch, and explore the toothbrush and toothpaste at their own pace.
- **Model the behaviour:**
 - o Brush your teeth alongside your child, showing them that it is a normal and positive activity.
 - o Use a mirror so they can see themselves brushing, which helps with visual feedback.

2) Gradual Desensitisation

Start small and progress gradually:

- o Begin by touching the toothbrush to their lips, then to their teeth without moving it.
- o Introduce brushing one or two teeth for a few seconds, gradually increasing as they tolerate more.

"Try-me" toothbrushes: Start with finger toothbrushes or silicone brushes that feel softer and less invasive.

Use oral massage tools (like Nuk brushes or chewable tubes) to prepare the mouth for brushing.

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3) Choose Child-Friendly Tools

Toothbrushes:

- o Electric toothbrushes with gentle vibrations can provide consistent input that some children find calming.
- o Toothbrushes with smaller heads or silicone bristles may be more comfortable.
- o Fun toothbrushes with lights, music, or favourite characters can increase motivation.

Toothpaste:

- o Try unflavoured or mildly flavoured toothpaste if traditional mint flavours are too strong.
- o Use non-foaming toothpaste to reduce the sensory overload from bubbles.

4) Make It Fun and Engaging

Incorporate visuals: Use colourful timers or apps with animations to track brushing time.

Music and movement: Play a favourite song or brushing-themed songs to create a fun routine.

Incentives and rewards:

- o Use a sticker chart or tokens for completing toothbrushing.
- o Offer praise or small rewards for trying new steps, like brushing one more tooth.



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5) Address Sensory Preferences

Temperature:

- o Experiment with the temperature of the water. Some children prefer warm water, while others like cold.

Pressure:

- o Let your child guide the amount of pressure applied during brushing. Allow them to hold the toothbrush if it makes them feel more in control.

Taste and smell:

- o Offer a few options of toothpaste to find the most tolerable flavour.
- o Consider using odourless toothpaste if smells are a trigger.

6) Prepare the Child with Sensory Input

Before brushing:

- o Use oral-motor warm-ups such as:
 - Drinking through a straw.
 - Chewing on crunchy or chewy foods (e.g., carrots, apples, or chewy tubes).
 - Blowing bubbles or blowing through a straw.
- o Massage the jaw, cheeks, or lips to relax the oral muscles.
- o Offer a weighted blanket or deep pressure hug to calm the nervous system.

During brushing:

- o Use a sensory fidget for them to hold with their other hand to provide calming input.

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7) Modify the Routine

Timing:

- o Choose a time when your child is calm and less likely to resist. Brushing does not have to happen immediately after waking or before bed if those times are challenging.
- o Break brushing into shorter sessions throughout the day (e.g., morning, after lunch, before bed).

Positioning:

- o Let them stand or sit in a preferred position (e.g., sitting on a stool or leaning against a wall).
- o Consider brushing in front of a mirror to help them see what is happening.

Collaborate:

- o Allow them to take turns with you during brushing.
- o Count together or make it a game (e.g., "Let's brush for 10 seconds on the top teeth!").



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8) Involve the Child in the Process

Let them choose their toothbrush and toothpaste to give them a sense of control.

Allow them to “help” brush your teeth or a sibling’s teeth to make it a shared activity.

9) Use Alternative Methods Temporarily

If traditional brushing is not possible:

Use a damp washcloth to gently wipe their teeth and gums.

Rinse their mouth with water or a child-safe mouthwash.

When Resistance is Strong

1. Break It Down:

- o Focus on brushing just one tooth or section per session.
- o Use a countdown (e.g., “We’ll brush for five seconds!”) and gradually increase time.

2. Provide Choices:

- o Offer options like, “Do you want to brush your teeth before or after the bath?” or “Do you want to use the blue or green toothbrush?”

3. Distraction Techniques:

- o Play a favourite show, video, or audio story while brushing.

Long-Term Support:

Regular dental visits: Communicate with your child’s dentist about their sensory needs. A dentist experienced in working with children with sensory processing differences can provide valuable tips.

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