

TEETH BRUSHING SENSORY STRATEGIES

Toothbrushing is an important daily activity, but for some children it can be challenging due to sensory sensitivities. The feeling of the toothbrush in the mouth, the taste or texture of toothpaste, and even the sound or vibration can feel overwhelming. Children with sensory processing differences may avoid brushing, become upset, or have difficulty tolerating the routine. Consider trying the following strategies:

- Consider the child's position and ensure they feel secure while brushing their teeth; consider using a step stool and positioning yourself behind them to help with their balance.
- Consider using a mirror so they can see themselves while brushing their teeth; this gives them visual feedback and may help reduce anxiety and improve cooperation.
- Try a very mild-flavored toothpaste if they seem sensitive to certain tastes.
- Use pressure touch while cleaning their teeth; light touch can be more irritating. Some children benefit from deep massage on their cheeks before tooth brushing activity, to help calm their nervous system and increase their tolerance to touch.
- If they cannot tolerate the toothbrush in their mouth, try an oral-motor desensitization program that can be child-directed if possible. Refer to the oral-motor suggestions handout on our website. Beginning with pressure touch to child's hands/arms, progress to pressure touch of face and cheeks as tolerated. If touch to cheeks is tolerated, then progress to applying pressure touch to mouth/lips, and to teeth and gums as tolerated.
- If the child is very sensitive, consider using a face cloth to wipe their teeth and consult with your dentist as well.
- If they only bite down on toothbrushes, they may respond best to using the Nuk Massager Brush or teething toothbrush (Baby Banana Teething Toothbrush), with close supervision as it is intended for babies.
- If they don't bite the toothbrush but teeth brushing is not tolerated, they may tolerate a finger toothbrush worn by their caregiver as it may be gentler. Use carefully as the child might bite on adult's finger while teeth brushing.

- Using an electric toothbrush can also help get the job done faster if tolerated; some children also find this calming.
- If they tolerate a toothbrush in the mouth but only for a short period of time, consider use of a three-sided toothbrush to make the brushing process quicker and more thorough. These toothbrushes are available through www.fdm.ca.
- Consider using behavioural strategies to help motivate them to brush their teeth: singing a favourite song while teeth brushing, using a musical and/or vibrating toothbrush, counting down or using a visual timer so they can see how long they are expected to brush their teeth, using “first/then” statements, giving a reward for after teeth brushing. *Keep teeth brushing short at the beginning, and gradually increase the amount of time brushing their teeth as tolerated.
- The use of interactive tooth brushing apps with a tablet/laptop can assist your child with brushing longer. The use of a timer with reward (i.e. extra book at bed time, special activity, etc.) could also assist with increasing your child’s tolerance for tooth brushing. There are “toothbrush timers” on YouTube with short 2-3 minute videos and music.
- Some children need modelling and demonstrations when becoming independent with teeth brushing. You can find online videos that will provide step by step instructions for proper tooth brushing. Using a vibrating toothbrush requires a different procedure for brushing (i.e., move the head slowly from tooth to tooth rather than using a back and forth motion) and videos to demonstrate the use of the vibrating or regular toothbrush may be helpful.
Some examples videos include:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcNAhUgH9U0>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUXAivWbnOw>
- Refer to the oral-motor suggestions handout for other suggestions, including the use of vibration.

If you have any questions or if the child shows stress signals, step back to re-assess activities that were presented and discontinue activity. Inform your occupational therapist if you currently have one providing support. Provide close supervision to ensure safety, especially when incorporating chewing activities.

* Recommendations were compiled from various web resources and therapists’ experiences.