

Oral Health Care for Children with Special Health Care Needs

Daily Oral Health Care Strategies

Good oral care begins at home. Children need a daily routine of care for their teeth and gums to stay healthy. Many children can learn how to brush, rinse and floss by themselves. Some will need continued supervision through adulthood, and others will need this task performed for them. All will benefit from this routine activity becoming a standard part of everyday life. Daily home care is the best way to prepare the child for care in a dental office.

The person teaching or providing home oral care will face many of the same challenges as the dentist in getting the child to cooperate. The following tips may be useful in creating or providing an oral care routine.

Set the Stage

- Choose a comfortable location – the bathroom is not the only place to brush teeth.
- When you brush the child's teeth for them, have the child sit in a chair or stand behind the child with their head on your chest to help stabilize their head if they pull away.
- Have adequate light, fresh water for rinsing, and a mirror if needed.
- Have all supplies; toothbrush, floss and/or floss aids, gloves if used, toothpaste and any rinses and/or swabs ready in advance.
- For children who might gag or swallow the toothpaste, use a tiny smear (rice size) of fluoride toothpaste, plain water or diluted fluoride mouthwash on the brush.
- Use adaptive toothbrushes and floss aids to make things easier for both of you.

Set the Atmosphere

- Approach oral care with a positive attitude and make it fun for the child.
- Use a tell, show, do approach when introducing new items or steps.
- Build trust and take it slow. Make the first several attempts positive to gain more cooperation later on. If you have used force in the past, start over and give the child a chance to comply. It may take time to rebuild trust.
- Use picture books, homemade experience books and puppets or toys to demonstrate.
- Give lots of positive reinforcement.

Set the time

- Have a routine. Same place, same time, same steps. This consistent routine builds confidence and the child will look forward to daily oral care.
- Read *Dental Care Every Day*, a free booklet available at www.nidcr.nih.gov.
- Brush, rinse, floss and/or apply dental products according to the dentist's instructions. Some children will need to have oral care several times each day.
- Keep a logbook of what works, what doesn't and questions for the next dental visit.
- Stay positive and keep working at it. The rewards are worth it for you and the child.

