

Home Dental Care for Children with Special Needs

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Editor's Note:

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Parents and caregivers of children with special needs are faced with many challenges, including providing adequate home dental care. Children who are unwilling or physically unable to cooperate for home dental care, such as brushing and flossing, need help from a parent or caregiver to maintain good oral hygiene. Although allowing a child to brush his or her teeth themselves allows the child to exert independence, if unsupervised the results are often poor. The amount of supervision necessary depends on the child's willingness to cooperate, ability to cooperate, and physical limitations.

Often, if a child has a medical condition that does not allow for easy access to the mouth, the child may need to be gently restrained by the caregiver in order to safely deliver dental care, allow for adequate visibility of the mouth, and convenient positioning. The positioning of the child during tooth brushing should allow for reasonable comfort of both the adult and child. Here are some recommendations for positioning of a child during tooth brushing:

- ◆ The child stands or sits in front of the caregiver so that the adult can cradle the child's head with one hand while using the other to brush the teeth.
- ◆ The child reclines on a sofa or bed with the head angled backward on the caregiver's lap. The child's head is stabilized with one hand while the teeth are brushed with the other.
- ◆ The child is seated on the caregiver's lap facing the caregiver while the child's head and shoulders lie on a second caregiver's knee, as the first caregiver brushes the teeth.
- ◆ A child who has a very limited ability to cooperate may require more than one caregiver to assist in tooth brushing. The child is reclined in the first caregiver's lap, while the child is gently restrained by a second caregiver and the first caregiver brushes the teeth.
- ◆ The child may also stand facing the caregiver with the caregiver's legs wrapped around the child, which allows the hands to support the child's head and brush the teeth.
- ◆ The method of tooth brushing that is most widely recommended is the horizontal scrub method, which is a very

convenient and easy method of effectively brushing the teeth. The toothbrush is applied to all surfaces of the teeth and gums in a horizontal back and forth method. Only a small amount of toothpaste should be used. Do not allow the child to swallow the toothpaste. If the child is unable to spit out excess toothpaste, wipe the mouth with a washcloth or suction the child, if suction is available.

The type of toothbrush recommended for use depends on the caregiver and the child. If the child is physically able to help with tooth brushing, an electric toothbrush with a thick handle will provide the child with a good grip on the toothbrush, particularly if the child has motor deficiencies. If the child is sensitive to vibrations or sounds, a manual toothbrush is recommended. If the child is unable or unwilling to help, the toothbrush selection then depends upon the caregiver's preference. The caregiver should select a toothbrush that allows for the best access to the mouth. Often, a flexible manual toothbrush allows the caregiver the best access. The toothbrush should be a soft multi-tufted nylon brush, not a hard toothbrush. Hard toothbrushes cause abrasion of the teeth and recession of the gums. If the child has a habit of biting on the toothbrush, the caregiver can place a toothbrush in the mouth for the patient to bite on and prop the mouth open while using another toothbrush to brush the teeth. The manual toothbrush or electric toothbrush head should be replaced every three months, or sooner if the bristles become worn or if the child has had a recent upper respiratory infection.

The key to providing adequate home dental care is consistency. Find a routine for tooth brushing and stick with it. You will be surprised with the results. ■

This material is provided for informational and educational purposes only; it does not contain specific medical advice. If you have specific health questions or problems, consult a health care professional for personal medical advice. To reach Patient Services at the main location of Children's Hospital Richmond, Va. call (804) 228-5818.

The Pediatric Dental Program at Children's Hospital of Richmond specializes in serving children with special needs. This program can be reached by contacting Patient Services at (804) 228-5818.

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