



Tooth Brushing in Child Care

Prepared by the Health Consultant Team at Child Care Aware® of North Dakota

Oral hygiene during the child care day is a good learning activity. Performing daily tooth brushing is a personal care routine that every child with at least one tooth needs. Brushing after a meal or snack in child care reinforces the concept of cleaning food off teeth and gums. Tooth brushing with fluoride toothpaste prevents gum disease and tooth decay.

Tooth brushing in child care helps overcome the lack of well-supervised twice daily oral hygiene at home. In many families, hurried morning and bed-time routines lead to skipped or poorly performed tooth brushing. Oral health professionals recommend adult assisted tooth brushing until the child can perform the task well. Usually, children need help until they are 4 to 6 years of age.

Standard 3.1.5.1 in *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for early care and education pro-grams, 3rd edition (CFOC)*, addresses routine oral hygiene activities. The standard says, "All children with teeth should brush or have their teeth brushed at least once during the hours the child is in child care... Children whose teeth are (properly) brushed (with fluoride toothpaste) at home twice a day may be exempted... The cavity-causing effect of frequent exposure to food or juice should be reduced by offering the children (mouth) rinsing (with) water after snacks and meals when tooth brushing is not possible."

CFOC no longer recommends wiping the gums of infants who do not yet have teeth. Current evidence shows benefit of oral hygiene starting when the child has a tooth.

Tooth Brushing Procedure

Facilities with large trough-type sinks or many sinks can do tooth brushing at sinks. However, sinks are not necessary. Many facilities have limited numbers of easily accessible sinks. Brushing teeth at the table after a meal or snack is finished provides peer reinforcement. Hand washing before tooth brushing is not necessary if the children wash their hands for a meal or snack and then do tooth brushing right after eating. Tooth brushing at the table makes it easy to supervise and teach more than one child to perform oral hygiene. Many Head Start and quality child care programs use this routine. It is a good transitional activity after eating.

Staff members:

1. Wash your hands, and then assemble the following items for each child.
 - The child's labeled tooth brush
 - A cup with just enough water for the child to wet the toothbrush. After brushing, the cup can be used as a spit cup or just thrown away.
 - The appropriate amount of fluoride tooth-paste on the edge of the cup. Children less than 2 years of age need a smear or rice grain amount; older children need a small pea-sized amount. Dispense the toothpaste only onto a clean surface, not directly onto toothbrushes. Regular adult toothpaste has the same fluoride concentration and is less expensive than toothpaste labeled and flavored for children. Children are less likely to eat the less flavored adult toothpastes. The teacher should dispense the toothpaste from each child's own labeled) toothpaste tube or from a single tube. Toothpaste should be inaccessible to children. Toothpaste is not necessary to teach children how to brush to remove food and plaque from their teeth. However, brushing without fluoride-containing toothpaste does not prevent tooth decay.
2. Demonstrate how to brush teeth up and down for 2 minutes with 1:1 teacher-assisted instruction of a different child each day. Wearing gloves is necessary only if the child has bleeding gums or mouth sores.
3. After brushing their teeth, have the children either spit into the cup or just swallow. The amount of fluoride in the recommended amount of toothpaste is not harmful. Learning to spit is a skill that some children do not acquire until they are 3 or 4 years of age.
4. Perform hand hygiene after tooth brushing. Children need to perform hand hygiene once after the combined activity of eating and tooth brushing. Teachers need to perform hand hygiene after helping a child with tooth brushing and removing gloves (if used,) and before helping another child.

Toothbrush Storage and Replacement

Have a personally labeled, size-appropriate toothbrush for each child. It is easy to write each child's name with a permanent marker on the handle of the toothbrush. If the label starts wearing off, write it on again.

Store toothbrushes with their bristles up and so the bristles do not contact or drip on any other surface. Label whatever holds toothbrushes in the upright position with each child's name. Use a commercial toothbrush storage rack or an individual cup for each child's toothbrush. Clean and disinfect racks or other brush holders frequently.

Awareness of the benefits of tooth brushing is growing. Remember to replace toothbrushes every three to four months. If a toothbrush becomes contaminated through improper storage or use by another child, replace it with a new one. A local dentist may supply toothbrushes as a gift to a program or to individual children at their check-up. Alternately, programs can buy toothbrushes in bulk at low cost.

References:
www.ecels-healthychildcarepa.org, Volume25, page 4, Winter 2013.
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