

# Trouble-free teeth!

Helping young children through teething and encouraging good oral hygiene as they grow older is an important part of an early years setting's role, says the British Dental Health Foundation...

**I**t is one thing for parents to handle their teething child, but it is quite another for early years practitioners to do so. It goes without saying, therefore, that knowing how you can help a young child through teething whilst they are under your care is an invaluable skill.

Caring for young children's teeth begins before their arrival and, given the right routine, that care should last a lifetime. The signs and symptoms of teething will become apparent before the tooth actually erupts; in most cases, it is this stage that will cause the most pain. The signs vary but can include swollen or red gums where the tooth is coming through, the cheek on the side of the mouth looking very red and, of course, disturbed sleeping patterns for both babies and their parents!

Other indicators of teething to look out for include dribbling, a desire to bite on anything and everything and, as a result, children putting things in their mouths. On occasions, it is possible to see the tooth cutting through the gum. To ensure clean, healthy gums are maintained prior to tooth eruption, it is recommended that you use an infant finger massager, which fits easily on the finger and can be used to safely clean young children's gums.

## Be prepared

There are many products designed to help children through teething, and those independently evaluated and approved by the British Dental Foundation can be found



## findoutmore

The British Dental Health Foundation is an independent charity which works to improve standards of oral health in the UK and around the world. Visit [dentalhealth.org](http://dentalhealth.org) for more information. For extra ideas on encouraging clean teeth in your setting, head to [stop-the-rot.co.uk](http://stop-the-rot.co.uk)

## Time for a check-up?

By the age of two-and-a-half years, children should be having regular dental check-ups. This means that many of the children in pre-school environments will already have an understanding of what a dentist does. However, it is still worthwhile clarifying the details. Some basic messages about the role of a dentist, plus an exploration of where a dentist works, will help to introduce children to what they can expect. An explanation of the surroundings dentists work in will help make first trips to the surgery far less daunting!



online. Options include teething rings designed for front, middle and back teeth, which effectively soothe the pain caused by teething. There are also special teething gels that you can use to help reduce the pain, some of which contain a mild painkiller. Certain gels and teething rings can also be stored in the fridge to provide further relief. When you come to apply a gel, use your finger and gently massage it onto the baby's gums. Teething pains can vary, so remember to consult with parents about any advice they have received from their dentist or health visitor.

## The next step

Ensuring cleaning their teeth becomes part of children's daily hygiene routine is vital, and early years settings can support parents' efforts at home by introducing teeth cleaning after meal times.

When beginning brushing with young children, you may find it easiest to stand or sit behind them, cradling their chin in your hand so you can reach their top and bottom

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teeth more easily. When the first teeth start to come through, try using a children's toothbrush with a small smear of toothpaste. Once all the teeth have come through, use a small-headed soft toothbrush in small circular movements and try to concentrate on one section at a time.

Children up to three-years-old should use a toothpaste with a fluoride level of at least 1,000ppm (parts per million). After three-years-old, they should use a toothpaste that contains 1,350ppm–1,500ppm. Remember to encourage them to spit out the toothpaste and not to swallow any if possible. It is important to supervise children's brushing even after they are able to take the initiative themselves – indeed the Foundation recommends overseeing the process until they are at least seven years-old.

altogether from a child's diet, but to combat the risks to dental health they represent, it is important to try to keep their consumption to mealtimes. Snacking is allowed, but do bear in mind it is better for the child's teeth and general health if they have three meals a day instead of seven to 10 'snack attacks', many of which will contain sugar. As such, try to offer children no more than two snacks in addition to their regular meals.

Combine this with your efforts to encourage children to visit their dentist regularly and keep in mind the need for them to brush their teeth for two minutes twice a day using a fluoride toothpaste from two-and-a-half-years-old. If you do this, you will help ensure your children's oral health remains good long after they have left your setting.

## Eating right

It is worth remembering that children are not born with poor oral hygiene habits; they are developed as a result of their environment – and a key factor in the environment is diet.

In general, the UK has developed a worryingly unhealthy food environment, where the frequency of snacking and consumption of sweets, sugary foods and drinks in unhealthy quantities has become the norm. This is making it ever harder to improve the dietary habits of children. The most important message to get across is it is not the amount of sugar the child will eat or drink, but the frequency of sugary foods and drinks in their diets.

An NHS survey in 2007/2008 revealed that a third of five-year-olds in England were showing signs of obvious dental decay. At such a young age it is unrealistic to remove sweet foods and drinks

## Eruption dates

Baby teeth begin to erupt at six months and are usually completed by two years of age. There are 20 baby teeth. They are shed between the ages of six and 12.

