



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Health

# Brush Up on Oral Health



December 2013

Did You Know?

- **Helping Children Brush Their Teeth**
- **Toothbrushing Challenges for Children**
- **Toothbrushing Tips: What Head Start Staff and Parents Can Do**
- **Cook's Corner: Snowman Crackers**

Young children don't have the fine motor skills until around age 7 or 8 (when they can tie their shoelaces without help) to brush their teeth well. But, to help young children form healthy habits, it's good for them to brush their teeth with an adult supervising.

An adult should thoroughly brush the child's teeth at least once a day (in the morning or before bed).

## Helping Children Brush Their Teeth



Young children, including [those with disabilities](#), often want to do things "all by myself." This can make brushing a child's teeth challenging.

To help children keep their mouths healthy, start brushing as soon as the first tooth appears in the infant's mouth. It's important for an adult to supervise brushing and help brush the child's teeth.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* points out some challenges in helping children brush. It also gives tips for how to make brushing a good experience. Head

Start staff and parents may need to be creative to help children keep their mouths healthy.

## Toothbrushing Challenges for Children

Young children, especially those with a physical, emotional, behavioral, intellectual, or communication disability, don't have the fine motor skills they need to clean their teeth well. Some things to watch for when helping children brush:

- **Holding the toothbrush.** Can the child hold the toothbrush firmly and bring it to his or her mouth? Is the handle too thin? Is the child able to close his or her hand over the handle?

- **Brushing and having teeth brushed.** Can the child keep his or her mouth open during brushing? Does the child gag when a toothbrush is in his or her mouth? Can the child hold still when an adult is helping brush the child's teeth? Can the child place and move the toothbrush over all of the tooth surfaces when brushing?
- **Using toothpaste.** Does the child dislike some toothpaste flavors? Does the child dislike how the toothpaste feels in his or her mouth? Is the child able to spit toothpaste out? Does the child swallow the toothpaste?
- **Brushing safely.** Can the child brush his or her teeth without hurting the mouth, tongue, or gums?

It is important to know what is working and not working well in brushing a child's teeth. Then Head Start staff or parents can reinforce good habits and help address any problems.

## Toothbrushing Tips: What Head Start Staff and Parents Can Do

Each child has different skills and needs that can guide Head Start staff and parents in helping him or her brush. Here are some tips to help young children practice brushing and to make it a good experience:

- **Choosing a toothbrush.** Use a soft-bristled toothbrush designed for brushing an infant's or child's teeth.
- **Holding a toothbrush.** If the child has trouble holding a toothbrush, try making the handle thicker by putting it inside a tennis ball. The toothbrush handle can also be strapped to the child's hand with a wide rubber band, a hair band, or Velcro. Toothbrushes with thick handles can also be found in retail and discount stores.
- **Teaching the child how to brush.** Break the process into small steps that the child can understand and practice. Ask a dentist, dental hygienist, occupational therapist, or early childhood specialist for help, if needed. Another way is to place a hand over the child's hand to guide the toothbrush as the child brushes. In Head Start programs, a staff person or volunteer can be assigned to a child who needs extra help.
- **Using toothpaste with fluoride.** Use toothpaste with fluoride that the child likes and that feels good in his or her mouth. An adult should always place toothpaste on the toothbrush. For children under age 2, use a small smear of toothpaste. For children ages 2–5, use a pea-size amount of toothpaste. If a child cannot spit, have the child tilt his or her mouth down so that the toothpaste can dribble out into the sink, a cup, or a washcloth.  
*Please note: The American Dental Association released new recommendations in April 2014 for fluoride toothpaste for young children. (See the [September 2014 issue of Brush Up on Oral Health](#) for information.)*



- **Positioning the child.** There are many ways a child can be positioned to make the child feel comfortable and allow an adult to brush his or her teeth. [Dental Care Every Day: A Caregiver's Guide](#) shows how a child can be positioned for toothbrushing.
- **Keeping the child engaged in brushing.** Use a timer, a short song, or counting as a game to encourage brushing for 2 minutes.

## Cook's Corner: Snowman Crackers

Here's a delicious healthy snack that children can make as a class project or at home with their families.

### Ingredients

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| 1 box round whole wheat or rice crackers | 1 carrot, cut into thin strips about ¼ inch long               |
| 1 package light cream cheese, softened   | 1 red or orange bell pepper, cut into strips about ¼ inch wide |
| 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed    | 1 to 2 celery stalks, cut into short thin strips               |

### Directions

1. Spread a thin layer of cream cheese onto 3 crackers
2. Arrange the crackers to make a snowman
3. Add black beans for eyes, a mouth, and buttons; a carrot for a nose; bell pepper for a hat; and celery for arms

**Safety tip:** An adult should slice ingredients.



## Contact Us

National Center on Health *Brush Up on Oral Health* Newsletter Staff

Katrina Holt: [kholt@georgetown.edu](mailto:kholt@georgetown.edu) • (202) 784-9551

Sarah Kolo: [sk22@georgetown.edu](mailto:sk22@georgetown.edu) • (202) 784-9553

Beth Lowe: [eal38@georgetown.edu](mailto:eal38@georgetown.edu) • (202) 687-1864

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The National Center on Health is grateful to guest author Jay Balzer for his contributions to this issue.

Read all issues of *Brush Up on Oral Health* at [Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center](#).

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