



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health

Brush Up on Oral Health

May 2014

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We'd Like to Know

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Oral Habits



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Non-nutritive sucking (for example, sucking on a thumb or a pacifier) or teeth grinding are common oral habits in young children. These habits are also common in children with special health care needs. Some Head Start staff and parents worry that oral habits may hurt a child's teeth or mouth or change the shape of a child's face or jaw.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* provides information on young children's oral habits. It offers strategies Head Start staff can share with parents to help their child practice oral habits safely and to stop oral habits that may damage their child's teeth or mouth.

Non-Nutritive Sucking and Tooth Grinding

Non-nutritive sucking: Sucking on a thumb, fingers, a hand, a pacifier, blankets, toys, or other non-food items is called non-nutritive sucking. Sucking helps comfort a child when he or she is tired, nervous, upset, or restless.

Tooth grinding: Tooth grinding happens most often when a child is in a deep sleep or is under stress. It is not always clear why children grind their teeth. In some cases, the child's

top and bottom teeth might not be lined up correctly, so the child grinds the top and bottom teeth together to get a better fit. In other cases, the child might grind his or her teeth because of an earache or teething pain.

Strategies for Head Start Staff to Share with Parents About Oral Habits

Using pacifiers: Pacifiers help satisfy a child's need to suck. Using pacifiers will not harm young children, as long as they are used safely. Pacifiers should never be used to replace or delay meals. Head Start staff can give parents these tips on safe pacifier use:

- Use a one-piece pacifier made of sturdy material that is firm and flexible.
- Do not place a pacifier on a ribbon or string, and never tie it to a crib or around the child's neck or hand, which can cause choking.
- Do not dip a pacifier in sugar, honey, syrup, or other sweet food, which can make it more likely that the child will develop tooth decay.
- Clean pacifiers with water often, and replace them regularly. Parents should not clean a pacifier by putting it in their mouth and then giving it to the child. This practice can pass bacteria that cause tooth decay from the parent to the child.



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Ending non-nutritive sucking: Most children stop non-nutritive sucking between ages 2 and 4. Children who use pacifiers usually stop sucking earlier than children who suck on a thumb, fingers, or other objects. Sucking past age 4 can change the shape of the child's mouth and teeth (for example, causing buck teeth). Changes in the shape of a child's mouth and teeth can cause the child to breathe through the mouth instead of the nose and can also cause speech problems and bite problems. Here are some strategies Head Start staff can share with parents to help a child stop sucking:

- Tell the child why they want the child to stop sucking. Tell the child that they believe the child can stop.
- Use reminders when the child wants to stop sucking but needs help. Put a bandage on the child's thumb or fingers as a reminder not to suck. Putting a mitten or sock on the child's hand at night can also help.
- Give the child something to track small successes. For example, put a star on a calendar for each day the child does not suck. At the end of a certain time period, give the child a reward for not sucking. Choose a reward that is not food.
- Talk to the dental office staff, a pediatrician, or a speech therapist about other strategies to help a child stop sucking.

Ending tooth grinding: Grinding rarely harms a child's teeth. The child usually stops grinding when the cause of grinding goes away. For example, when the child no longer feels stressed or has an earache or teething pain, grinding will probably stop. If grinding does not stop over time, parent should talk to the dental office staff about other strategies to help stop it.

Cook's Corner: Cucumbers and Hummus

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

Ingredients

- 2 cucumbers, ends trimmed
- 1 cup hummus
- ½ cup red or orange bell peppers, finely chopped
- ½ cup green onions, finely chopped (optional)



Directions

1. Slice the cucumbers into ¼-inch-thick rounds.
2. Spoon ½ teaspoon of hummus onto each cucumber slice.
3. Sprinkle the top with the bell pepper and onion (if using).

Safety Tip: An adult should slice ingredients.

Contact Us

Beth Lowe: eal38@georgetown.edu • (202) 687-1864
Katrina Holt: kholt@georgetown.edu • (202) 784-9551

The National Center on Health welcomes your feedback on this newsletter issue as well as your suggestions for topics for future issues. Please forward your comments to nchinfo@aap.org or call (888) 227-5125.

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This newsletter was prepared by Beth Lowe, Katrina Holt, Ruth Barzel, and Sarah Kolo of the National Center on Health under contract #9OHC0005 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, by the National Center on Health. This publication is in the public domain, and no copyright can be claimed by persons or organizations.

School readiness begins with health!