

## Teeth Brushing Strategies

Some children with sensory issues find the sensation of brushing their teeth difficult. This may be due to a number of reasons:

- They may register touch at a much higher level than others and so the sensation of the tooth brush in their mouth may feel uncomfortable or even painful to them.
- The smell of the tooth paste or the taste may be over powering for them causing them to gag or withdraw.
- For some children, especially those with little language or understanding it may be that it's the act of having something done to them that they have little control over, or fear about what is going to happen.

Generally it is important to brush the teeth gently and avoid vigorous cleaning that may result in you pushing the toothbrush too far back in the child's mouth causing gagging. Below you will find some tips that might help your child be more independent with tooth brushing and keep those pearly whites squeaky clean.

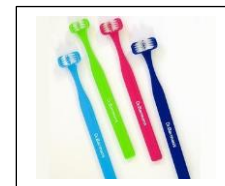
1. **Consider the type of brush you are using:** Some children may find the sensation of the bristles uncomfortable.

**Try using a brush with extremely soft bristles or silicone bristles.** A baby toothbrush could be a useful transition tool eventually transition to a regular brush or a silicone finger tooth brush. For example:



There are a number of silicone baby toothbrushes online Amazon.

**Try a toothbrush that can get the job done faster.** For example, a multi-angled toothbrush such as Dr Barman's Super Brush Multi-Angled Toothbrush from Fledgelings.org.uk cleans faster and gets all three sides with just one brush motion. The bristles are super soft to gently clean the gum tissue.



**Try an electric toothbrush.** For some the vibrating effect of an electric toothbrush can be soothing, although they will not suit everyone due to the noise. Example: electric Spin brush or a flashing timer toothbrush.

**If your child likes music, consider a singing toothbrush.** There are lots of varieties of musical toothbrushes on the market, from ones that sing songs to ones that make animal noises.

2. **Experiment with different toothpastes.**

Some children don't like the taste of the mint and can perceive it to be a painful, burning sensation or they don't like the foaming of the toothpaste. First try different flavors of toothpaste, such as bubblegum, strawberry, orange, etc.

**If your child is really sensitive, maybe flavored toothpaste isn't the best option.** Also, the foaming of the toothpaste may be causing unpleasant sensory sensations and discomfort. Oranurse is a flavorless and non-foaming toothpaste that was created for children on the autism spectrum who were sensitive to strong flavors and taste. This toothpaste doesn't foam and has zero flavor, which may help ease your child's comfort. This can be obtained from [Fledgelings.co.uk](http://Fledgelings.co.uk)



### 3. Activities to help with brushing:

If your child is sensitive to touch and taste or in any way anxious about having their teeth cleaned it is important to preparing your child's sensory system before brushing.

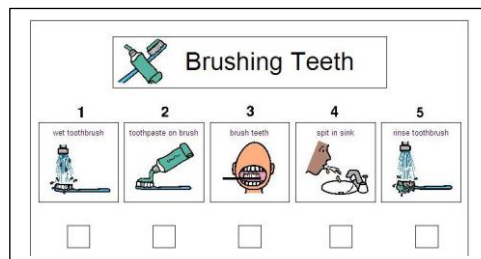
**Consider the environment:** Creating the right environment for calm relaxed brushing is important. Is the bathroom too cold, too bright or echoing? Would they prefer to do it down stairs in the kitchen?

Try brushing teeth while in the bath or shower.

You can also give your child a cup and some bath toys while you brush his/her teeth at the sink. Water play at the sink is a simple distraction.

Think about giving plenty of time for brushing, don't create stress by needing to rush the task.

**Provide visual support:** Visuals are important for preparing our children and letting them know what is going to happen next. Even if your child knows what to do think about creating a visual support that lists clearly what the process is of cleaning teeth. This is especially important for children who are having their teeth brushed for them so they feel more in control. They can either mark off each step as it's done or remove it if on Velcro. (See tooth brushing visuals in our other resources).



Or create your own visual by taking photos of the steps and arranging them in sequence.

Brushing teeth to a favourite tune, using a timer or having a countdown system may also help to develop a routine.

**Prepare your child's sensory system.** This is important as they will already be anxious at the mention of brushing teeth. We need to desensitise the sensory systems that are over alerting e.g.: tactile (touch sense) Olfactory (smell sense) Gustatory (taste sense). This can be done in a number of ways:

1. Reduce over arousal and anxiety by having your child engage in a fun activity involving using their muscles against resistance such as: tug of war, wall pushes, or deep pressure through their joints by tight squeezes.



2. Desensitise the mouth area by having them suck a cold drink through a sports bottle or straw. Or have them suck on a small ice cube or ice pop prior to brushing. Alternatively why not try games that involve blowing through a straw or blowing bubbles.

4. Other Tips:

- **Brush when your child brushes.** Brush your teeth at the same time as your child. Be enthusiastic about it, making it look appealing.
- **Take turns brushing.** Let your child brush their own teeth first before you do it for them. You can also try and give your child your brush and let them brush your teeth while you brush theirs (it can be a good distraction!).
- **Brush in front of the mirror.** This might help your child feel more control of the situation. Visually being able to see the tooth brushing process can help as opposed to a situation where you're facing your child and they cannot see what's going on.

**If brushing really is a battle, it's important to start small.** If your child isn't comfortable with a regular toothbrush, or the electric toothbrush, start with brushing only one or two teeth for a couple seconds, (maybe with the baby silicone bristle toothbrush?), then stopping. A couple days later, you can "up" the amount of teeth you attempt to brush and add on a few more seconds. Remember go slow! Sometimes a desensitization process is needed.