



Toothbrushing 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 toothbrushing 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. Toothbrushing with fluoride toothpaste prevents gum disease and tooth decay.

Toothbrushing 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 toothbrushing. Oral health professionals recommend adult assisted toothbrushing 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 programs*, 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 toothbrushing 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.

Toothbrushing Sinks

- If possible, select a sink that is not used for toileting/diapering.
- If the sink is used toileting/diapering, disinfect the sink/faucet/handles before children brush their teeth.
- Sink does not need to be disinfected before each child, only before the group of children.

Toothbrushing Procedure

Facilities with large trough-type sinks or many sinks can do toothbrushing at sinks. However, toothbrushing at sinks is not required. Many facilities have limited numbers of easily accessible sinks. Brushing teeth at the table after a meal or snack is finished provides peer reinforcement.

Handwashing before toothbrushing is not necessary if the children wash their hands before a meal or snack and then do toothbrushing right after eating without leaving the table. Toothbrushing at the table makes it easy to supervise and teach more than one child to perform oral hygiene and saves time. 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 toothbrush
 - A cup with just enough water for the child to wet the toothbrush. (NOTE: water should be obtained at a sink not used for toileting/diapering or at a sink that has been disinfected.) After brushing, the cup can be used as a spit cup or just thrown away.

2. Place the appropriate amount of fluoride toothpaste on the inside rim of the cup. Children less than 3 years of age need a smear or rice grain amount; Children 3 years old and older need a small pea-sized amount.
 - Dispense the toothpaste on to the cup, not directly onto toothbrushes unless each child has their own tube of toothpaste. Instruct/help children to use their toothbrush to pick up dabs of toothpaste on their cup. After the toothpaste is on the toothbrush, the child can wet the toothbrush with water in their cup.
 - 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 mint flavored adult toothpastes. Toothpaste tubes should be kept out of the reach of children.
 - Toothpaste is not necessary to teach children how to brush to remove food and plaque from their teeth. However, brushing with fluoride-containing toothpaste is recommended.
3. Demonstrate how to brush teeth (insides, outsides, and chewing surfaces) 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.
4. After brushing their teeth, encourage the children to spit into the cup. If they can't spit, they can 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. Give children a paper towel or tissue to wipe their mouths.
5. Collect the toothbrushes without allowing the bristles to touch. Rinse and store the toothbrushes.
6. Perform handwashing after toothbrushing. Children need to perform handwashing once after the combined activity of eating and toothbrushing. Teachers need to perform handwashing after helping a child with toothbrushing and removing gloves (if used) and before helping another child.

Toothbrush Storage and Replacement

Have a personally labeled, size-appropriate toothbrush for each child. Write each child's name with a permanent marker on the handle of the toothbrush or use label.

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

Awareness of the benefits of toothbrushing 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.

Sources for more information:

- American Academy of Pediatrics
<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/oral-health/Pages/default.aspx>
- American Dental Association
www.mouthhealthy.org/en/babies-and-kids

References:

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