

Discover Creative Ways to Get Your Kids to Brush

I have to admit I grumble about going to the dentist. I don't like being tipped backwards in a chair while trying to keep my jaw wide open. Inevitably, saliva starts trickling down the back of my throat and I feel like I am going to gag or, worse yet, choke.

I am about as excited at going to the dentist as I am about cleaning out my garage. I frequently tell the poor guy I'd rather be in labor than spend time with him. Nothing personal, I love my dentist; I just don't enjoy the experience.

So how do I get my kids enthused about going to the dentist and encourage them to develop good oral hygiene habits?

I am happy to report that there are some great methods for teaching good oral hygiene principles to your kids.

I wish I had had this information between my younger daughter's last two appointments; we might have avoided the eight cavities she developed. While a timer and electric toothbrush have been helpful, I need more tricks up my sleeve or the tooth fairy is going to go broke.

First, some common sense approaches to oral hygiene:

- Model great oral hygiene for your kids. Why not brush your teeth with them in the morning and in the evening?
- In addition to brushing, also floss. Small hand-held flossers are easier for kids to manipulate than traditional spool dental floss.
- Encourage your kids to rinse with a fluoride rinse.
- It is necessary to brush more than just a quick up and down to get the job done right, so go ahead and use an

egg timer.

- If it looks like your child is headed for bed before the routine brushing time, keep an extra toothbrush in the downstairs bathroom ready to be used immediately after mealtime.

Having trouble getting your kids to buy into the fact that they really need to brush? Hear them moan and groan about how their teeth are clean? Plaque is hard to see, after all.

Try these eye opening activities, worthy of presenting at future science projects:

- **Show the invisible plaque.** Combine three or four drops of red food coloring with a few tablespoons of water in a paper cup. Have your child swish the colored water around in his or her mouth for about ten seconds and then carefully spit it out into another cup or a nearby sink. Then have your child look in a magnifying mirror and look at the red areas which show where the plaque is. Have your child brush his or her teeth with toothpaste and repeat swishing with the colored water. See how much of the plaque is gone and then talk about the areas where the plaque hides.
- **Do a flossing demonstration.** Talk about the importance of flossing with your child. First you can show them how to floss, and then you can also demonstrate by using their hands and yarn. Have your child hold his or her hands together with fingers pointing straight up and tight together. The fingers represent the teeth. Then take a piece of yarn to floss between the fingers. To make the demonstration more vivid, smear some tempera paint between the fingers to represent the plaque between the teeth, and then floss with the yarn. This is a powerful visual for the kids to see how much paint (plaque) can be cleaned with the floss.
- **Show how dental sealants protect the chewing surfaces of the teeth.** You will need the following supplies for this

demonstration: two antacid tablets, vinegar, two small paper cups, and a small piece of plastic wrap. This demonstration shows how dental sealants (the plastic wrap) protect a tooth (the antacid tablet) from the vinegar (the plaque plus sugar). Wrap one of the antacid tablets in the plastic wrap and leave the other unwrapped. One represents a tooth with a sealant (the one with the plastic wrap) and one without a sealant. Place each tablet in a separate paper cup. Cover both of the pretend teeth with vinegar. Wait five minutes and then pour off the vinegar. The acid in the vinegar has started to dissolve the unwrapped antacid tablet (the tooth without the dental sealant). Then take the plastic off the other antacid tablet. Show your kids how the plastic wrap protects the pretend tooth from the acid, just like a dental sealant. This exercise ought to convince your child to keep their mouth open long enough to have the sealants applied, a process which is not painful and helps to prevent cavities.

- **Talk about healthy snacks.** Talk about the five main food groups with your kids: grain, fruits, veggies, milk, and meat, and show them where they fall under the food guide pyramid. You can explain or review each of these food groups and why each is important for healthy bodies and teeth. Free reproducible food guide pyramids for kids are available on the United States Department of Agriculture's website. After kids have done the sealant activity, it is motivation for them to eat healthier snacks to ensure healthier teeth. Eliminate as much sugar as possible!
- **Demonstrate decay.** Take an apple and put a one-inch deep hole in it. Place the apple in a paper bag and set it aside for a few days. Cut through the place where the hole was and have your kids look at the effect of decay. It shows how decay spreads through a tooth. You can then explain why brushing twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and flossing every day is important. You can

also grab a fresh apple and show them the difference by comparing the two.

Keep the conversation going. By asking your kids the following questions you can engage them in conversation and get them thinking about their teeth:

- Name three things teeth do. They are important for speaking, eating, and smiling. If you didn't have any teeth, it would be hard to say *teeth*, *toys*, or *toothbrush*.
- Have kids recite the alphabet and notice which sounds are made by using their teeth, tongue, and lips.
- Ask kids to make a list of what foods can be eaten without teeth and what foods they need to chew. Ice cream may be all right for awhile, but forget caramel apples.

It is never too early to start your child developing good oral hygiene habits. And by making it fun, you will help to ensure your dentist won't have to listen to more than one member of your family grumble!

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