

STOP BRUSHING BATTLES

Give teeth-brushing wars the brush off with these tried-and-tested tactics from **ROISIN JOHNSON**. Polishing pearly whites has never been so fun!

Does even the slight glimpse of a toothbrush send your toddler crashing into a complete meltdown? You're not alone, because when it comes to keeping those chompers clean, kids can certainly be a defiant lot! "It can be really tough for parents," says Karleen Giampietro, a dental nurse and the 'Tooth Fairy' for Melbourne's Smile Solutions clinic. But perseverance is key, as brushing your tot's teeth is so important for his oral health now and in the future. "Making the process fun and interactive can help encourage your toddler to cooperate with brushing twice a day, and if you manage flossing in there too, that's a bonus," Karleen says. One appealing approach could be all it takes to get your littlie happy about brushing, she adds, so here are a few ideas to get you started...



ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENCE

While the experts say your tot won't be old enough to brush his own teeth until the age of eight, you can give a sense of independence by having two toothbrushes – one your child uses and one for you to finish the job. "To help your toddler understand where he's brushing, get him to first use his finger to feel right up to his back teeth," says Karleen. Then give him a pea-sized amount of children's toothpaste (if he's older than 18 months, otherwise just use water) and encourage him to get in there. You'll need to follow up with a thorough scrub of each tooth, particularly around the gum line.



ADD SOME COLOUR

"Let your toddler choose an age-appropriate toothbrush and let him know it's an exciting purchase and it's his," advises dentist Dr Peter Alldritt, chairman of the Australian Dental Association's Oral Health Committee. Brightly coloured, character-emblazoned brushes usually go down a treat, as do musical

brushes, brushes that glow or light up, and kids' electric toothbrushes.



LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Making teeth-brushing a family activity can be a very successful tactic. "Watching his parents having fun while brushing their teeth will encourage a toddler to join in too," says Karleen. Siblings are great role models as well, so use these to your advantage. You can almost guarantee if a toddler sees an older sibling doing something, he'll want a go too! Those getting their teeth brushed don't need to be human, either. If your pet's good at getting his pearly whites polished, let your toddler watch and use this to encourage him.

GOING TO THE DENTIST

When? "As soon as your child's teeth start coming through take him to the dentist, and then every six months," says Karleen. "Even though baby teeth fall out, they're important for the development of adult teeth and help with speech and chewing." **Tips for the first trip** Keep your talk surrounding the dentist positive and be careful not to pass on your own fears! Pick a paediatric dentist or a dentist you know is good with children. Read dentist-themed stories to prepare your littlie or check out the Tooth Fairy's website (www.toothfairy.com.au) for fun activities and a video about what to expect. On the day, let him bring along a favourite toy to help him relax.

Picture: iStockphoto

"If he's not keen to let you brush when it's your turn, tell him he can brush the spots in your mouth you missed if he lets you do his," Karleen suggests.

"You can also see if he wants to brush with a buddy such as a soft toy," Karleen says. Make it more fun by getting him to pick a different toy each time.



MAKE IT A GAME

There are lots of ways to make your tot laugh when the brushes are out, which will help turn the experience into a more relaxed affair. You might think of a food your child has recently eaten and tell him you're on a hunt to get that particular food out, for example. "Telling your toddler you want to tickle the 'sugar bugs' out of his teeth sometimes works too," says Karleen. Try getting your littlie to sound out funny words ('baaaaaaa' or 'staaaaaaa'), or go through the vowels – he'll enjoy making funny faces and odd noises, plus this gives you access to different areas of his mouth. You can also play a teeth-brushing song, use a timer or download an app with its own timer and games related to tooth time.



CHART THE SUCCESS

"I'm surprised at how successful the classic reward chart still is," says Dr Alldritt. "A child loves seeing a visual of what he's achieved as well

as getting a daily reminder of how good he's been." But have you ever considered putting yourself on the chart too? It shows your toddler you're also part of it, giving him even more encouragement, Dr Alldritt says. As well as that daily stamp, gold star or smiley face on the chart, if your littlie reaches a certain number of days or weeks of great brushing, you could offer him a reward such as a special outing or something oral-hygiene related, such as a snazzy electric toothbrush like Mum and Dad have.



DISTRACT!

When all else fails and you need to get the job done, try distraction. "Brushing your toddler's teeth while he's in the bath is a good idea," says Karleen. As well the fact he's likely more relaxed and already having fun splashing around, this can make the task less messy and means he's in an easy, reclining position for teeth cleaning. Brushing teeth doesn't have to be done in the bathroom either, Dr Alldritt advises, especially if that's a place your toddler has built up negative associations. "Try letting him watch something on TV that is only for when he brushes his teeth, so he

associates teeth-brushing with something positive," suggests Dr Alldritt.

"A toddler is often more cooperative when lying reclined on your knee as opposed to standing, too." You could also tell him a story and the longer he cooperates with brushing, the more he gets to hear. 

LOSING TEETH

A child normally loses his first baby tooth around the age of six and the last of his little chompers at around 12 or 13 years of age. When your littlie has a wobbly tooth, you can use the tactics you employed when he was teething to help relieve any discomfort, such as offering cool foods to suck on and even using a bit of teething gel. "It won't do any harm for you to gently wobble it every day to encourage it to fall out either," says Dr Alldritt. If your toddler has a tooth knocked out, it's worth getting it checked by your dentist. "A baby tooth is never put back, but it's not normally an issue," Dr Alldritt assures. For more info on toddler teeth, visit www.babyteeth.com.au.