



Developmental disabilities often affect the skills necessary for completing tasks in everyday life, including maintaining good oral health.

Providing dental care for children with disabilities takes planning, time, and the willingness and ability to manage the child's physical, mental and behavioral problems.

Brushing and flossing daily and visiting the dentist regularly can make a difference in the child's quality of life.

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How developmental disabilities affect oral health

Developmental disabilities often affect the skills necessary for completing tasks in everyday life. People with these disabilities often need help with their daily activities; maintaining good oral health is no exception.

Children with developmental disabilities are at a higher risk for oral problems including cavities, enamel irregularities, gum and oral infections, delayed tooth eruptions and bite problems.* Caring for a child's oral health is as important as caring for his/her overall health and should be addressed daily to avoid pain, tooth loss and low self esteem.

Providing this care takes planning, time, and the willingness and ability to manage the child's physical, mental and behavioral problems.

Oral health care at home

Location is important when helping to brush someone's teeth. For many people, the bathroom is ideal, but some find a living room or kitchen more comfortable.

After you find the most comfortable place to brush your child's teeth, use the same technique at the



same time and place every day. Your child will have an easier time accepting dental care as it becomes familiar and the routine may help eliminate some fears.



Steps for a healthy mouth

Brush every day. If your child is able to brush on his/her own but needs some assistance, try some creative ways to help, including:

- Make the toothbrush easier to hold. Children who use a strap to hold other utensils may find it helpful to use the same strap to hold the toothbrush. Others use a rubber band to hold the brush in place by looping the band over the toothbrush and sliding the hand between the band and the brush.
- Make the toothbrush handle bigger by:
 - Cutting a slit in a tennis ball and sliding it onto the toothbrush to make it easier to grasp.
 - Attaching a bicycle grip or foam tubing to the handle for a better grip.
- Try other toothbrush options such as an electric toothbrush that might make brushing easier.

If your child needs help brushing, these tips may be useful:

- Make sure your position and the lighting is such that you can easily see each tooth.
- Use a toothbrush with soft bristles and a small amount of toothpaste. If your child has trouble swallowing or is bothered by toothpaste, brush with water instead.
- Brush the front, back and top of each tooth using short back-and-forth strokes.
- Help your child rinse with water after brushing. If your child cannot rinse, give him/her a drink of

water and/or sweep the inside of the mouth with your finger.

Floss daily. Flossing cleans between the teeth and removes debris that a toothbrush can not reach. Many children with disabilities need a parent's help to floss their teeth. Flossing takes a lot of practice to perfect, but these tips may help make the job easier:

- Wrap a piece of floss around the middle finger of each hand.
- Grip the floss between the thumb and index finger of each hand and gently slide the floss between the teeth until it touches the gumline. Curve the floss around each tooth and slip it under the gum, sliding the floss up and down each side of the tooth.
- Adjust the floss as you switch teeth so that the floss is clean for each one.

Maintain a healthy mouth

Protect your child's teeth through fluoride and healthy snacks. Children who enjoy nutritious foods and who get enough fluoride while their teeth are forming will get fewer cavities than those who do not.

Make regular dental visits. Regular dental appointments and professional cleanings can identify potential problems before they cause pain and discomfort. Like dental care at home, it is important that your child feels comfortable at the dentist's office. Sometimes it is a good idea to request a visit with no treatment so that the child can meet the dentist, sit in the dental chair and receive oral hygiene instructions.

* National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, June 2003