

Oral Health in Early Years Settings



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This guidance has been produced to support all early years settings promote good oral health, whilst complementing the Early Years Foundation Stage and Ofsted requirements.

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Why should early years settings teach oral health?

Teeth are really important, they are used for eating, talking and smiling. The most recent national oral health survey of 5-year-old children, showed that 26.9% of 5-year-olds had experience of decay. This is largely preventable. In the early years we are able to teach children and help them develop life skills which can shape the rest of their lives, this can include tooth brushing and healthy eating.

Oral Health is in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Learning about oral health also supports areas of learning and development, from physical development (by teaching about tooth friendly snacks, helping children to brush) to communication and language (by children being able to select snacks and identify fruits and vegetables). More information is available at: <https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/oral-health#why-oral-health-is-in-the-EYFS-framework>

What are the key messages for good oral health?

1. Keep sugary foods and drinks to mealtimes only	• Snacks should be tooth friendly and can include fresh fruit and vegetables, savoury breads and cheese. • Water and milk are the safest drinks for teeth. • Sweets and cakes should not be given at snack. Dried fruit should be kept to mealtimes.
2. Brush teeth twice a day for two minutes	• Brush as soon as the first tooth arrives. • Children will have 20 baby teeth by the time they are two and a half years old. Brush for two minutes. • Children need help brushing until they are 7 years of age. • Brush at least twice a day, the most important time is at bed time and then another time of day e.g. the morning.
3. Use the correct dose of fluoride toothpaste for age	• For children under 3 years use a smear of paste with 1350 –1500ppm of fluoride. • For children 3 years and over use a pea sized amount of paste with 1350 –1500ppm of fluoride.
4. Spit don't rinse	• After brushing spit out any toothpaste, but don't rinse mouth with water or mouthwash, let the fluoride work to strengthen teeth.
5. Stop using a dummy and bottle when baby is one year old.	• Introduce an open cup from 6 months, letting baby learn how to drink from a cup. • By one year children should be able to drink from an open cup. • Reduce a dummy to sleep time only from 6 months. • By one year remove the dummy letting baby develop their speech.
6. Visit the dentist regularly	• To find an NHS dentist visit: www.nhs.uk

How to support tooth brushing

Toothbrushing is a key life skill. Children need to be taught to brush all the sides of their teeth (inside, outside, and biting surface). Toothbrushing helps remove the plaque from teeth (which causes tooth decay), and lets us put fluoride on the teeth which strengthens the tooth and helps prevent decay. Children need help to brush their teeth until they are at least 7 years of age. Some children struggle to brush their teeth, so by focusing on it in the nursery it can motivate the children and help parents.

Brushing Schemes:

Some nurseries have programmes where children brush their teeth every day. Even settings that do not have easy access to sinks are able to coordinate this activity. It teaches children the importance of brushing for 2 minutes. By doing it as part of a group activity it motivates children to develop good brushing habits.

Further information can be found at [Improving Oral Health: Supervised toothbrushing programme toolkit](#); *Commissioning and delivering supervised toothbrushing schemes in early years and school settings. Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, (updated 17 April 2025)* Or The Brush Toolkit: <https://www.supervisedtoothbrushing.com/>

Health week or month:

The Oral Health Foundation runs the Smile Month (mid May to mid June), why not plan activities to support the campaign. If daily brushing is not possible, due to your physical environment, why not try brushing for just a week, raising awareness of its importance. During this time children could design their own toothbrush charts to complete at home. You could offer a prize at the end for children who brushed twice a day (making sure the prize is a non food item!).

Role play:

In the home corner why not create a dental surgery, with big teeth models and toothbrushes. Let the children practice brushing the teeth and pretend to be the dentist, receptionist or patient. There are a variety of books and games that you can get to support the dental play theme.

Art:

The end of a drink bottle makes great teeth, let children paint them white so they can see where to brush. Egg boxes can be used to make teeth, and can make effective displays. You can also look at the teeth of animals, such as a crocodile and get children to make the teeth and hang them up in numerical order, there are lots of creative ideas on the internet.

Toothbrush exchanges:

To encourage parents to brush at home, organise a toothbrush exchange where old brushes can be exchanged for a new brush, age appropriate paste, brushing chart and perhaps a two minute timer. A local dentist may offer support with brushes and paste or a local business.

People who help us:

Why not see if a local dentist will visit your setting to talk to the children? Perhaps a parent who works in a dental practice could talk to the children about the importance of

Links to EYFS:

Physical development—health and self care

Mathematics—numbers

Understanding the world— people and communities

Literacy— reading

Expressive arts and design—exploring and using media and materials

How to support healthy eating

The EYFS states that where children are provided with meals, snacks and drinks, they must be healthy, balanced and nutritious. Fresh drinking water must be available and accessible at all times. It is important that foods and drinks are tooth friendly. Sugary foods and drinks should be kept to mealtimes only (this includes dried fruit and juice).

Food Policy:

A food policy helps set out your approach to food and drink provision. Whether you provide only snacks, packed lunches or hot meals, it is important that parents understand what they can expect. A policy can cover:

- the food and drink you provide for meals, snacks and drinks
- rewards, celebrations, special events and birthdays
- how you cater for cultural, religious and special dietary requirements, including managing allergies and intolerances
- how you manage fussy eating
- bringing in food and drink from home
- food safety and hygiene
- the eating environment and social aspects of mealtimes
- communicating with children and families

Further information can be found at **Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition:** Helping early years providers offer healthy, balanced and nutritious food <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-nutrition>

Snacks:

It is important that your snacks are tooth friendly, fresh fruits and vegetables are a good choice, so are savoury breads (muffins, pitta, toast), cheese and dips like hummus. Involve children by getting them to select snacks for the following day or week, helping to cut, prepare and serve the snack, and pouring their own drinks. Snack time can be used to talk about food, where it comes from, how it grows and develops children conversation and social skills. Parents may want to offer children a snack at collection (which can sometimes be high in fat and sugar) why not offer free fruit at pick up times?

Birthdays and celebrations:

Celebrations do not need to focus on sweets, children are just as excited by stickers, pencils, certificates, and small gifts. Sweets are consumed so often that they are no longer seen as an 'occasional treat'. As sugary foods and drinks should be kept to mealtimes, if birthday cake is provided, give it out at lunch for children's pudding. Cake can also be sent home so that parents can decide if and when to provide it.

Displays / newsletters / leaflets:

Sometimes it can be hard to think of new ideas for packed lunches or snacks, you could provide displays, newsletters or leaflets with ideas, this can also help parents during school holidays. If you provide hot meals why not offer the recipes to parents.

Teaching healthy eating:

There are lots of ways to teach about food including:

Communication and language development	Sitting around a table eating teaches conversation and social skills
Physical development	Gardening, using knives and forks, preparing food, and washing up helps develop
Personal, social and emotional development	Cooking activities offer opportunities for learning through working with others
Expressive arts and design	Art activities can engage children with food and alert them to colours and shapes

Reducing dummy and bottle use

If children use a dummy this should be reduced from 6 months. Open cups should also be introduced at 6 months. By the time baby is one year of age, the use of bottles and dummies should stop. This is important because a child's speech can be effected if they have a dummy or bottle beyond one year of age. If a bottle is being used only milk or water should be put in it, any other type of drink can cause severe tooth decay. The EYFS has a strong focus on communication and language so settings may need to help parents with their child's dummy or bottle use, to help with their language development.

Policy:

If you have babies in your nursery you may need a policy to inform parents when you will give a child their dummy and when you will not, for example: only at sleep time and if a child is very upset, but at all other times the dummy will remain in a suitable storage place (named cup or in their draw).

Dummy tree:

A popular idea to help children give up the dummy is having a tree (as a wall display or a model of a tree), children are encouraged to give up their dummy by hanging it on the tree.

Dump the dummy, bin the bottle:

You may want to hold a amnesty, where parents and children can exchange their bottles for an open cup, or dummies could be exchanged for story books, helping to promote speech and language development.

Open cups:

Children do not need to drink from bottles. Give children drinks from an open cup and let them pour their own water, helping promote a child's independence.

How to support parents

Displays and Newsletters:

Early years settings can use a variety of methods to communicate key messages to parents, including displays, newsletters, induction packs. Topics can include packed lunch choices, contacts for local dental practices, sugar content of foods and drinks. This is also a good way of getting all the staff involved by thinking of display items and information.

Take home resources:

Some settings use story bags, containing books about keeping teeth healthy, visiting the dentist and encouraging brushing. These bags can contain other resources to help reinforce a child's learning, such as teeth models and brushes. Some settings use a toy to create a story (e.g. Barney Bear visits the Dentist, Barney Bear brushes his teeth) children can take the bear home and must brush its teeth twice a day. Parents have reported that by using these activities children are more willing to have their teeth cleaned at home or to visit the dentist.

Oral health resources

Resources and further information

Gov.UK

Collection Oral health: Information and resources to improve oral health and reduce inequalities in England. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/oral-health>

Oral Health - Help for early years providers <https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/oral-health>

Why is Oral Health included in EYFS: <https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/oral-health#why-oral-health-is-in-the-EYFS-framework>

Supervised toothbrushing for children to prevent tooth decay:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/supervised-toothbrushing-for-children-to-prevent-tooth-decay>

Commissioning and delivering supervised toothbrushing schemes in early years and school settings. Office for Health Improvement & Disparities:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-oral-health-supervised-tooth-brushing-programme-toolkit>

Brush: Supervised Toothbrushing Toolkit: <https://www.supervisedtoothbrushing.com/>

Eatwell Guide: makes healthy eating easier to understand by showing the types and portions of foods we need to have for a healthy and well balanced diet. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition: Helping early years providers offer healthy, balanced and nutritious food <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-nutrition>

NHS

Guidance on looking after Children's teeth: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-teeth-and-gums/taking-care-of-childrens-teeth/>

Drinks and cups for babies and young children: <https://www.nhs.uk/baby/weaning-and-feeding/drinks-and-cups-for-babies-and-young-children/>

Who can get free dental treatment: <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/dentists/who-can-get-free-nhs-dental-treatment/>

HENRY is a national charity giving babies and young children a healthy start in life and helping prevent child obesity. HENRY is an evidence-based programme. www.henry.org.uk

Oral Health Foundation is a charity dedicated to raising public awareness of dental and oral health and promoting good dental health practices. <https://www.dentalhealth.org/>

Family Lives is a national family support charity providing help and support in all aspects of family life, there is information on teething. www.familylives.org.uk

Colgate Bright Smiles Bright Futures resources for teachers and families. Focused on prevention, the programme builds self-esteem and teaches good oral health practices to create lifelong habits: <https://www.colgate.com/en-gb/mission/oral-health-commitment/bsbf>