Promoting healthy teeth in 3-4 year olds

Aims
To establish:
- the understanding of unhealthy oral habits
- the understanding teeth have many purposes: eating, speaking and smiling
- the understanding some foods are tooth-friendly, while others are not
- the understanding oral hygiene is important
- a positive and friendly image of dental staff.

At this age, children need concrete experiences on which to base their play and learning. The activities suggested in this kit have been designed to assist active learning. You may wish to organise a visit to a dental clinic or alternately invite a dental professional to your facility. However, these activities have been designed to help educators to promote the central oral health concepts without such assistance.

Be aware some of the strategies outlined in the 4-5 year olds section will also be relevant to this age group. We expect you will adapt this program depending on the abilities of the children in your facility.

Remember, strategies should also be adapted to suit your setting. They are provided as guides or suggestions and are intended to be flexible. You should feel comfortable modifying activities to suit various ages, group sizes and learning settings.

Objectives

Children will:
- practise hygiene before and after meals
- brush their own teeth with adult supervision and assistance, using a toothbrush
- use toothbrushes in the correct manner
- become familiar with words such as healthy, unhealthy, tooth-friendly foods, plaque, gums, decay, circles, scrub, jiggle, bristles and fluoride
- role play dental staff to strengthen awareness and develop understanding
- feel happy, relaxed and confident about a visit to a dental clinic
- understand what to expect at a dental visit, and accept check-ups will help them to have healthy teeth and happy smiles
- reduce use of dummies or thumbsucking.
Promoting healthy teeth (continued)

Strategies

Physical

Gross motor
- Jump over tooth-friendly foods and jump on foods that are not tooth-friendly.

Fine motor
- Use lots of action songs and rhymes that incorporate finger movement.
- Have pieces of paper in the shape of a smile and other pieces in the shape of teeth available in the art area for free expression.
- Have dough available in pink (lips) and white (teeth) so children can make their own smile.
- Paste magazine pictures of healthy food and drinks onto paper plates so they resemble meals. Ensure there are appropriate pictures in the magazines before giving them to the children to use.
- Make dental attire (eg. coat, mask, gloves) available for dress-ups (masks should not be shared and cotton or vinyl gloves may be used to avoid latex allergies). For safety, ensure all dental attire used by this age group has velcro or large clips as fasteners rather than sharp items such as safety pins. (See Dentist coat pattern in the Educator resources section.)
- Help children learn how to wash their hands and brush their teeth using the ‘wash-eat-brush’ concept.

Cognitive

Including language, critical thinking, communicating, cultural awareness and understanding, sense of self.
- Ensure learning experiences are supported by various forms of visual stimuli within the immediate environment.
- Use puzzles to reinforce information and concepts (see list in Additional resources section).
- Use stories to reinforce the development of concepts such as daily brushing, hand washing, healthy foods, functions of the mouth and teeth and the role of dental staff (see Additional resources section).
- Repeat enjoyable songs to aid understanding and reinforce concepts.
- Use familiar food items to reinforce the idea that just because ‘it tastes nice’ doesn’t mean it is healthy. Take care not to reinforce the notion that good food tastes bad.
- Use simple ways to sort tooth-friendly foods from those that are not tooth-friendly.
- Use cooking activities to support healthy food concepts (see recipes in the Newsletter items section).
- Sit on a low chair and get children to come up to you one at a time to ‘open wide’. This action reinforces the dental check-up process and makes children more comfortable. Sing the song Open Wide, Let’s Check Inside, It’s Teeth Time, It’s Teeth Time.

Social/emotional

Including sense of self, cultural awareness and understanding, social living and learning, environmental understanding.
- Allow for hands-on experiences with different types of tooth-friendly food, including some unfriendly food.
- Allow for role playing opportunities.
- Identify agreed times for thumbsucking/dummy use to reduce habit.
Case study: correct tooth brushing

The educator begins the session with the rhyme:

We are all stretching

1. We are all stretching, stretch, stretch, stretching,
   (use arms to stretch out showing freshly awoken)
   We are all stretching,
   This fine day.

2. We are all washing, wash, wash, washing,
   (wash face with hands)
   We are all washing,
   This fine day.

3. We are all eating, eat, eat, eating,
   (right hand scooping out from left hand
   and taking it up to the mouth)
   We are all eating,
   This fine day.

4. We are all brushing, brush, brush, brushing,
   (use pointer finger in a tooth brushing
   action on front of mouth or teeth)
   We are all brushing,
   This fine day.

5. We are all ready, waiting and ready
   (sitting with hands in lap, and legs crossed)
   We are all ready,
   This fine day.

The above activity can be followed by the pop-up book *Brush Your Teeth Please* by Leslie McGuire. The main emphasis of this book is to show how the bear, chimpanzee, hippopotamus, lion, shark and children brush their teeth.

After reading the story, the educator discusses the following:

- animals need to keep their teeth clean - as do humans
- we clean our teeth so they are bright, white and healthy
- we brush our teeth at least two times a day.
Case study (continued)

This leads into the use of the Smile poster series including:

• a healthy set of teeth in a child’s mouth
• an unhealthy set of teeth in a child’s mouth.

The educator is able to use these to support the idea that the unhealthy teeth are caused by the build up of plaque. The germs in plaque make acids which weaken teeth and cause holes, called decay.

The question is raised as to whether the child is a boy or girl and the educator suggests it doesn’t matter because most children who are 3-4 years of age have the same number of teeth and have them in the same place. She also encourages the children to watch how she cleans the tooth model’s teeth with the toothbrush - 10 tiny circles or jiggling on the front, teeth together, on the left side and again on the right side, scrubbing on the top of the teeth and then jiggling on the inside all the way around (see Fact sheet 5).

The educator uses a song *Round in Circles* (see Songs, rhymes and activities section) to reinforce this concept and then finishes the session with a dismissal rhyme about cleaning teeth.

**Dismissal rhyme**

Mai-ling cleans her teeth,
She cleans them twice a day,
She claps her hands and turns around,
As she goes out to play.

Mario cleans his teeth,
He cleans them twice a day,
He jumps along and gives a smile,
As he goes out to play.

**Discussion triggers**

• Who has their own toothbrush at home?
• Who helps you clean your teeth at home?
• How often do you clean your teeth at home?
• When do you clean your teeth?
• What happens when you clean your teeth?

**Resources**

• Happy Teeth poster set - Smile series
• Toothbrush
• Toothbrushing sticker
• Fact sheet 5 - ‘Correct tooth cleaning techniques’

Q: How much toothpaste do you put on the brush?
A: About half the size of a pea!

Q: What do you do when you finish brushing your teeth?
A: Spit out, don’t rinse!