Promoting healthy teeth in 2-3 year olds

Aims
To establish:
- healthy oral health behaviours
- 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.

As an educator of the 2-3 year age group, you are aware of the need to base planning on individual needs and interest. At this age, a child has limited life experiences and needs to have concrete experiences on which to base their play.

The information provided in this section is mainly for educators working with children individually or in groups of up to five or six children. Strategies will need to be adapted for larger groups. Remember, Happy Teeth strategies are provided to assist and guide staff. They are intended to be flexible and educators should feel comfortable modifying activities to suit various ages, group sizes and learning settings.

Objectives
Children will:
- cease any potentially unhealthy oral health behaviours, such as bottle use
- begin taking care of their teeth with adult support
- become familiar with words such as healthy, unhealthy, tooth-friendly foods and toothpaste
- role play dental staff with the support of the educator
- feel happy, relaxed and confident about a visit to a dental clinic.

Strategies
- Encourage reduced use of a bottle until the habit stops. Work closely with parents/carers to reinforce this at home.
- Encourage children to try to brush their teeth at home. Children of this age do not have the manual dexterity to clean their teeth properly and will require adult support and assistance (see Fact sheet 5). Encourage them to ask an adult for help!
- Provide puppets, dolls or toys that have teeth for the children to play with. (See Additional resources.)
- Provide ‘hands-on’ food packages and plastic foods for play - encourage discussion about tooth-friendly foods.
- Make use of as many books about teeth and healthy food choices as possible to increase the child’s knowledge. Some of the books listed in the Additional resources section may not have appropriate script for this age group, but many have pictures that may be suitable for use with individual children.
- Use opportunities to demonstrate dental procedures at appropriate moments, such as when reading books or showing posters.
- Utilise the poster series to increase the child’s knowledge of key concepts eg. visiting the dental clinic.
- Encourage parents/carers to count teeth at home.
- Celebrate new teeth. At this age, children are getting the last of their baby teeth at the back. Parents/carers can tell the educator when a new tooth comes through and this can be celebrated with the group.
Case study: Introducing tooth care to toddlers

The educator is sitting with a group of three toddlers.

The educator talks about the children’s teeth and how to look after them. The children are encouraged to open wide and show all their ‘Stevie Strongteeth’ and to practise ‘wide open smile’.

The discussion finishes with the educator singing Here’s a tooth in your mouth with the children.

(Tune: Here’s a House With a Wall)

1. Here’s a tooth in your mouth, in your mouth, in your mouth, (point to teeth)

2. Here’s a brush for your teeth, for your teeth, (hold pointer finger horizontally to mouth)

3. We can brush, brush, brush after lunch, lunch, lunch, (move pointer finger up and down in front of mouth)

4. Our teeth are shining bright, shining bright, our teeth are shining bright (show a wide open smile)

Resources
Fact sheet 5 – ‘Correct tooth cleaning techniques’