

## **Smile please – ensuring the oral health of children in care.**

Visiting the dentist is an anxious time for many children in care. For some it can be the first time. Others may be fearful because of poor past experiences and previous lack of support. The dentist can be yet another stress in a stressful life.

If we have not been to a dentist before, or regularly, we could find it hard to understand what is happening. A visit to the dentist, even for a check-up, brings a lot physically and emotionally. These can be powerful if not overwhelming, the glaring bright lights, the loud sounds of drills and electric toothbrushes.

Stresses in any form need approaching sensitively and in a planned staged way.

- Brushing along to your favourite song
- Hearing nice things said about the dentist.

## **Here's one example of how it can be done by a home.**

'A teenager with co-occurring needs hadn't been to the dentist for over 2 years due to a previous poor experience. We spent a great deal of time slowly introducing the idea of the dentist through discussions. We paid for an initial private appointment while awaiting allocation of an NHS dentist. We discussed in everyday talking the benefits of attending the dentist and shared personal experiences to role model that we didn't find it scary. We gave lots of reassurance and attended all appointments with them. Yes, we did give incentives to go to the initial check-up. We told the child of the appointment well in advance and each stage of the countdown had some preparation involved.

## **Here's one example of how it can be done by a dental service- and more.**

They have created a one-stop for specialised mental health, dental, speech and language therapy ... (that's integrating care!!!)

## **Training our dentists!?**

There is a limited understanding by the dental profession of the level of needs, anxiety, previous experiences of children in care. The relationship with the dentist needs to include appreciation that appointments can be missed because the person has 'changed their mind' or refusing or in the middle of a crisis.

The British Dental Association has published an overview for understanding and practice in their journal British Dental Association Journal Volume 234 No 1 January 2023

[bdj looked-after-children-an-overview-for-the-dental-team.pdf](#)

Maybe print one and give to your dentist? However, it is short on practical tips although it says, 'In order to provide the best dental care for LAC, an understanding of their individual needs and situation is essential'. It does say (and you can use the new terms highlighted?) 'LAC are more likely to present with dental disease and may

have little experience of dentistry. They may also be **dentally anxious**. It is important that their dental needs are identified and managed and care is prioritised. Some LAC **may require additional acclimatisation**’.

So, taking this as an invite we could share our positive behaviour support planning with the dentist? And also, how best to communicate with this child, and to help them cope with anxiety. A visit to get to know each other, even for 5 minutes might be helpful? Asking the receptionist to say Hello to the child when they arrive could be a good icebreaker? Giving the child something to hold whilst in the chair might be useful?

### **Checklist from Ofsted**

Questions about **prevention** could include:

- How do you ensure that children have a balanced and healthy diet, including any snacks and drinks?
- Are you reducing the intake of sugar where you can? Do you look for low sugar or sugar-free alternatives where available?
- Are sugar-free medicines being used when they are available?
- Does the child’s care plan feature oral health? How well is this followed? Is it updated after a dental visit?
- What other resources, such as dental passports or mouth-check forms, are being used?

Around **access**, inspectors might ask questions such as:

- Do children have access to routine dental care? If not, what are you doing about this?
- Do you support and encourage children to go to the dentist?

Inspectors may also ask about **routines**, such as:

- Do staff remind children to brush their teeth regularly?
- Do staff support children with cleaning their teeth?
- Are there enough aids – such as toothbrushes, floss and mouthwash – available?
- Are staff role models for good oral hygiene?

This is a structure called Capability + Opportunity + Motivation)

## **Educating children**

Take a moment to consider the dexterity needed to brush teeth. And, it's complex physically and cognitively. It needs to be learned and encouraged and accompanied by someone who cares.

### **[School Oral Health Lessons, Links and Downloads | Better Health North Somerset](#)**

**<https://www.thenational.academy/teachers/programmes/science-primary-ks1/units/healthy-me/lessons/brushing-teeth>**

## **Educating staff - training available by the NHS**

### **For staff**

#### **[Mini MCM e-learning for non-dental health and social care workers involved in the care of Looked After Children \(LAC\)](#)**

**Type:** elearning

#### **[Mini Mouth Care Matters Mouth Check for LAC/ChiC](#)**

**Type:** File

There is a NICE Guideline for adult care that could be made child-friendly. [Overview | Oral health for adults in care homes | Guidance | NICE](#)

## **Other resources for education**

### **‘Let’s talk about teeth’ project.**

This looked at the dental health needs of LAC in Tower Hamlets, London.

They found that

- 36% of 5 to 11-year-old LAC had experienced tooth decay in their primary teeth.
- 12 to 15-year-old LAC had a higher number of decayed, extracted and filled permanent teeth than the general 12-year-old population in Tower Hamlets
- 19% had one or more untreated, decayed permanent tooth.
- A higher proportion of LAC had a tooth fracture when compared to their peers.
- 32% of 12–15-year olds reported that a dental problem had affected their daily lives in the preceding three months.

**A new CQC report about adult care has some useful information to include in training.**

**[Smiling matters: oral health care in care homes - Care Quality Commission](#)**

The report reveals an extensive lack of awareness of NICE guidelines. It concludes that residents are not supported to maintain and improve their oral health.

The amount of detail in care plans varied greatly between homes. There were some excellent examples of person-centred care planning driven by a thorough assessment of a person's preferences and needs. However, when reviewing 291 care plans across the 100 care homes it was found that

- 27% of care plans fully covered oral health
- 63% of care plans partly covered oral health
- 10% of care plans did not cover oral health at all.

Among the homes visited:

- most had no policy to promote and protect people's oral health (52%)
- nearly half were not training staff to support daily oral healthcare (47%)
- 73% of care plans reviewed only partly covered or did not cover oral health.

### **For a staff meeting**

Tooth decay is preventable, it:

- is one of the most common chronic childhood diseases worldwide, and it is the leading cause of needing to use paediatric general anaesthetic in the UK.
- can cause pain and discomfort, leading to difficulty in eating, speaking and sleeping, and affecting academic performance as well as overall quality of life.
- can result in abscesses, with some children becoming severely unwell or septic and needing hospital admissions.

There are also wider concerns about poor oral health. Children may:

- experience embarrassment and be self-conscious about their smile, leading to potential psycho-social effects such as social withdrawal, anxiety and depression.
- have impacts on their general health including heart problems, breathing problems, diabetes and joint inflammation.
- have difficulty eating so that they are at risk of poor nutrition and overall health.

### **The last word**

Brushing matters and it is said it needs to be as long as it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice. Here's some brushing teeth words to Happy Birthday (it needs a run through and practice!)

***Brush your teeth, brush your teeth***

***Give them all a treat***

***Brush up and down and all around  
To keep them clean and neat.  
In the morning and at night  
Clean them twice a day  
Brush up and down and all around  
Keep fillings well away.***