I have two children. My daughter is the eldest and, like older siblings, she always aims to please. She was receptive to brushing her teeth. She wanted to be a big girl. She participated in simple tooth brushing tell-show-do. I thought I was the best dentist-dad in the world.

My son, however, has sailed down a different path. He is a two-year-old, the rough-and-tumble dirty type who takes joy in throwing mud at our patio windows. He responds to oral hygiene with the same horror that my wife displays when she sees her just-cleaned windows caked in mud. At tooth brushing time, he can run away from me at the speed of an Olympic sprinter. Once caught, he displays an anti-brushing defense mechanism that is best described as the angry flaying of a slippery octopus combined with the high pitch wailing of a sea harpy.

This is a problem. Even after I catch him, how do I clean his teeth? How do I convince this young boy to participate in tooth brush time? I do not want to put my fingers near his teeth. I am scared.

continued on page 94
You see, my son does not care about cavities, girls, inflation or clean windows. He cares about Thomas the Tank Engine, red rocket ships and dinosaurs. He is turned on by fun and off by necessity. I have had to relearn and invent new ways to keep tooth brushing exciting for him. Here are some tips based on my experience.

Banish Fear

If someone sticks a foreign object in your face, you will pull away. The same is true for kids. That’s why it’s important to let your child hold and play with the tooth brush before you begin brushing. I gave the brush to my son while he was in the tub and an amazing thing happened. My son dunked it in the water and sucked on it. He thought it was a marvelous invention for drinking and didn’t understand why he couldn’t use it at the dinner table. The toothbrush ceased to be a scary object and is now an object of fun.

Use Peer Pressure

Kids love to copy. They have a natural desire to mimic fun activities. This is how our brains learn about society and the world around us. I must not be fun. My son will not copy me. My son only wants to copy his big sister. He looks up to her figuratively and literally. I knew this.

One particularly stubborn night as the family was brushing their teeth, I left my son’s tooth brush on the counter where he could reach it. I didn’t tell him to pick it up. Instead I got down to my daughter’s level and we began taking turns brushing each other’s teeth. She was having great fun and it showed. Not wanting to be left out, my boy went to the counter, grabbed his brush and buded in front of his sister shouting, “Me too! Me too!”

Count to Five

Having my teeth brushed vigorously by a laughing six-year-old and a two-year-old with poor eye-hand coordination taught me another important lesson: When brushing, it is important to take breaks. Brushing all four quadrants without a break can feel claustrophobic and suffocating to a child. So, every night I brush to five. At five, we stop, close our mouths, swallow, take a breath, open our mouths and brush to five again. To make it fun, sometimes I sing to five, sometimes I count like Arnold Schwarzenegger and sometimes I count in Spanish. But I always stop at five. I do not want to ruin his trust. It is fragile. This means I may count to five an average of 10 times a night if that’s how many times it takes to get clean.

Name Your Child’s Teeth

I have found that giving each tooth a name is fun. This works at home or in the office. For new patient exams, I will give each tooth I see a name. “I see Abby and Betsy and Candice and Dorothy. Hello Everett, Freddy and Grayson.” Kids find it amazing that so many names could fit in their mouth.

Adopt a Brushing Buddy

Some kids are teachers. They like to lead the group and tell everyone else what to do. For these young scholars, I might suggest a Brushing Buddy. A Brushing Buddy can be a teddy bear, a doll or any similar inanimate object. It should not be your cat, dog or similar living creature. Have your young educator demonstrate good tooth brushing habits to his Brushing Buddy. Maybe even buy your child’s Brushing Buddy his own tooth brush.

Find the Right Tooth Brush

Parents always ask me which tooth brush is the best. The best tooth brush is the one your child will allow you to use; the one that helps them want to brush their teeth. Some kids are excited by Barney, some by Cinderella and others by Spiderman. Get the tooth brush that your child accepts and excites them about tooth brushing. (Please note that this may mean having multiple tooth brushes for different days or different moods!)
Reward Success

Keeping track of successful tooth brushing sessions is helpful. A calendar stuck to the mirror is fun. A sticker on a chart can be a reward for a job well done. After your child earns a set number of stickers, or at the end of each month, offer your child a prize like a new tooth brush or new toothpaste flavor.

Watch TV

Who was it that said brushing had to be in the bathroom? Maybe a change of scenery is in order. How about the living room while the TV is on? I’m not advocating television as a substitute to personal interaction but let’s be truthful: for some people, TV is a visual narcotic with sedative effects and, depending on the challenges facing each family, this may be a viable option. You can also experiment with iPad apps for brushing too. We’ve tried Teeth Timer, Monster Mouth, Ali’s Teeth Out and iBrush, to name a few.

Try the Tag Team

Of course, there will always be those children out there who are destined for the World Wrestling Federation. No amount of coaxing, singing, counting, pleading, begging or stickers is going to convince this little athlete that clean teeth are better than dirty ones. In this situation I might suggest a two-person brushing technique I call the “Tag Team.” This brushing technique can be tough, but consistency and routine will make things better over time.

Here’s how it works:
1. Find an adult partner and sit knee to knee.
2. Lay your child’s head in your lap while the other adult supports your child’s body in his/her lap.
3. Have your partner lean forward and hold your child’s arms and legs while you brush the teeth from above. This position will allow for better access and visibility to the operator/brusher.
(Note: I feel that using tooth paste in this position can be particularly unpleasant for children because it can run down the back of their throat. Please remember to take breaks and allow your child to swallow or clear his mouth. Better yet, use a dry toothbrush while lying down and toothpaste when in the upright position.)

I hope these ideas can help you or someone you know. To keep my son interested in tooth brushing, I need to come up with something new every night. It is not always successful and it can be frustrating. However, most of our successes are a variation on the ideas in this article.

For many children, routine and familiarity rule the roost, so changing the order in which teeth are brushed or even the song you sing while brushing can cause stress. There is nothing wrong with that. Find what works and sail with it.”

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Author’s Bio

Dr. Tim Wilson is from Bemus Point, New York. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree at Allegheny College and then earned his doctorate in Dental Science from the State University of New York at Buffalo, School of Medicine and Dentistry. In 2001 he moved to Tucson and completed an Advanced Education in General Dentistry residency program on the Tohono O’odham Indian reservation. He spent the following three years treating underserved children in downtown Phoenix before returning to New York and completing his pediatric specialty education at the University of Rochester, School of Medicine and Dentistry.

Dr. Wilson is a diplomate of the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry and a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. He is an oral sedation examiner for the Arizona State Board of Dental Examiners, serves on the Arizona Dental Association Council on Dental Education and as a Board member for Delta Dental of Arizona Foundation. He is on the Medical Staff at Scottsdale Healthcare. Dr. Wilson is currently the President of the Arizona Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. He practices at Affiliated Pediatric Dentistry and Orthodontics in Scottsdale. Dr. Wilson met his wife, Amanda, while he was studying in Australia. They live in Scottsdale with their two children, Ally and Jonathan. They enjoy traveling (mainly to Australia), reading, geocaching and off-road adventures.