

How to Teach Your Kids Healthy Habits

Imagine for a moment that it's dinnertime on a warm summer evening. You go to the door and call to your child who is in your backyard, playing in the mud. You tell him he must wash his hands before dinner. As you return to the kitchen, you hear him turn on the water in the bathroom sink and about 10 seconds later you hear it turn off again. You call to him from the kitchen, "with soap!" You hear the water turn on again.

As you sit down to eat, you see that the fronts and backs of his hands are clean but there is still mud between his fingers so you send him back to the bathroom with a stern reminder that he must also wash-with soap!-between his fingers. He grumbles but obeys, returning to the table 30 seconds later, wiping his wet hands on his pants. As he reaches for his fork you notice that mud and gunk still remain under his fingernails. With an exasperated sign, you lead him by his arm to the bathroom where you demonstrate how he must dig the gunk out from under his nails to avoid getting germs and bacteria into his mouth.

A parent who understands how disease is spread would never allow their child to eat with mud between their fingers and under their nails, so why would one let them go without flossing every day? The likely reason is they're also not flossing because they don't understand why they should.

If you're among the 70% of adults who don't floss daily, there is some pretty gross stuff stuck between your teeth right now. That nasty layer of grit that forms on your teeth and prompts you to brush is called "biofilm". It's made up of



bacteria that feed on the food and sugars that are stuck to your teeth. These bacteria do what all organisms do—they excrete waste (in this case in the form of acid) that eats away at your tooth. And they're not only living on the front and back of your teeth. No matter how well you brush, if you're not flossing—much like the mud that's left between your child's fingers and under his nails—that biofilm (and all that it excretes) is still stuck between your teeth and under your gum line.

(If you're one of the 30% of adults who flosses every day but your hygienist still has to scrape beneath your gum line, you're not flossing correctly. We've included some handy links instructional videos at the end of this article to help you out.)

Are you thoroughly grossed out right now? Great! Seize the moment and resolve to take better care of your gums by flossing daily. Set a good example and see that your child flosses every day as well. After all, habits that are formed during childhood are easier to keep throughout a lifetime. So, how can you make flossing a habit that lasts, instead of a resolution that you forget about in just two weeks?

HOW TO MAKE FLOSSING A HABIT THAT STICKS (FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILD.)

It's never too late to develop a new, healthy habit, however, it's not always easy. As a matter of fact, studies show that depending on how difficult the task is and your personality, it can take anywhere from 18 days to 8 months before your desired behavior happens automatically (aka: a new habit). On average it takes about 66 days. So if your New Year's resolution is to floss every day but it hasn't become automatic by February, that's totally normal. Don't give up! Follow these tips to make flossing part of your daily routine by St. Patrick's Day:

- 1. Motivation is essential:** no matter how many clever tips and tricks we provide, unless you really want to change your behavior, you'll likely fail. Every time you think of skipping your daily floss, remember the bacteria (and the tooth-destroying waste it leaves behind!)
- 2. Get help from a buddy.** Ask your spouse, roommate, or BFF to hold you accountable. Or better yet, make your child your "flossing buddy" and floss together. Kids are great at giving adults a hard time for their bad habits, plus you can make sure they're flossing correctly. (More on that below.)
- 3. Define your trigger.** Every habit, whether bad or good, has a trigger—something that gives you the urge to floss. This can be anything

from a visual cue, a reminder you set on your phone, or simply the bad taste in your mouth that might also make you think to brush. Which leads us to our next tip...

- 4. Bundle your habit.** It's common sense to floss at the same time you brush, which should already be a habit. The key is to floss before you brush. By removing the gunk on the sides of your teeth, the surface will be exposed to the fluoride in your toothpaste, helping to strengthen the enamel.
- 5. Reward good behavior.** Download our handy chart to track the days you remember to floss (link listed below.) Hang it by your sink to serve as a visual reminder. At the end of the week, give yourself a small reward for flossing every day. At the end of the month, reward yourself with something bigger! Don't let a missed day discourage you. Remember, it takes an average of 66 days to form a new habit but nobody is perfect. Don't throw in the towel when you slip up!
- 7. Get the gear.** There are many different ways to clean between your teeth including traditional floss, interdental cleaning devices, and water flossers. Try a few to see which works best for you and your child.

Lastly, be sure you're flossing correctly. Below you will find links to fun videos from a dental hygienist who *loves* to talk about teeth and flossing on YouTube.

Resources:

Find our Flossing Rewards chart at AmericasToothFairy.org/resources

For instructional videos go to YouTube.com and search:

- Teeth Talk Girl, How to Hold Dental Floss Properly
- Teeth Talk Girl, Is Flossing Necessary? (How To Use Interdental Brushes)
- Teeth Talk Girl, How to Use a Water Flosser (without making a mess)



As a resource provider, America's ToothFairy increases access to oral health care by supporting nonprofit clinics and community partners delivering education, prevention and treatment services for underserved children. We work to ensure all children can access dental care and learn about oral health. Learn more at AmericasToothFairy.org. Copyright 2020.
