

How to Keep Children from Grinding Their Teeth

Regular teeth grinding or clenching, also known as bruxism, can begin as soon as a child's teeth appear. It occurs more frequently in children, adolescents and young adults than in middle-aged and older adults — and is particularly common in toddlers and preschoolers. Here's how you can find out if your children are grinding or clenching their teeth and what steps to take next.

Why children grind their teeth

Teeth grinding usually takes place while sleeping, but children can also grind their teeth when awake. Although there is often no apparent cause for grinding or clenching, it can be associated with:

- Pain from teething or an ear infection
- Exposure to secondhand smoke
- Misaligned teeth
- Stress or anxiety
- Medications for some conditions, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Nighttime breathing or sleep problems
- Medical conditions such as autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy and gastrointestinal reflux disease

In addition, teeth grinding occurs more frequently in families with a history of grinding or clenching.

How to tell if children are grinding their teeth

The most obvious sign of teeth grinding is a loud, grating, gnashing sound made while sleeping or awake. Children who grind or clench their teeth often wake up with a sore jaw or face, headaches and earaches. They may also experience pain while chewing.

Why teeth grinding can hurt children's smiles

In addition to causing pain, teeth grinding can chip teeth, wear down protective tooth enamel, make teeth more sensitive to hot or cold, lead to tooth decay and damage fillings.

Teeth grinding can also keep a child from getting a good night's sleep, which can have negative effects on school performance. One study showed that preschoolers who experienced frequent teeth grinding were more likely to be withdrawn and have greater difficulties adjusting to preschool.

What to do if you suspect teeth grinding

- Visit your dentist to see if your child's teeth are being damaged by grinding or clenching. If your child is an infant or toddler, your dentist will probably take a wait-and-see strategy. With an older child, depending on the situation, your dentist may recommend a custom night guard. Usually night guards are only used after permanent teeth have erupted and there is evidence they are being damaged (around age 7 or older).
- Schedule an appointment with your child's primary care medical provider if your dentist suspects a medical condition could be a contributing factor.
- Try to find the source of the problem if you think your child is experiencing stress or anxiety.
- Make bedtime as relaxing as possible. Create a peaceful environment by reading a book, listening to relaxing music, having quiet time or encouraging your child to take a warm bath or shower.

Many children outgrow teeth grinding or clenching around the time their permanent teeth start to come in. However, you should not delay seeing your dentist if your child is experiencing teeth grinding at any age to make sure it isn't causing any permanent damage.

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