

Grown-ups have lots of reasons to be stressed. Working. Paying the rent or mortgage. Keeping up with the fluctuating cost of gasoline and heating oil—and sinking 401(k) balances. Maintaining relationships. Raising a family. Putting food on the table. As a result, this stress sometimes manifests itself in physical symptoms, one of which has implications for oral health: teeth grinding (also known as bruxism). While they may not have to worry about making the mortgage payment or keeping a job, children experience their own forms of stress, which means that they, too, can fall victim to bruxism, resulting in headaches, earaches, and in chronic cases, facial pain and temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disease. By being aware of the signs of bruxism, parents can be better prepared to help their children maintain optimum oral health, resulting in happier and healthier children.

Many people with bruxism—which can develop at any age, according to the American Dental Association (ADA)—are unaware that they have it because either they don't realize they are grinding their teeth or it only happens when they are asleep. Children, especially, are less in tune with their health and not always able to pinpoint where or why something is hurting them. And with a condition like bruxism, which oftentimes only occurs during sleep, parents need to pay extra attention to spot the symptoms.

In the majority of cases, parents detect bruxism through the sound of their children's upper and lower teeth clenching together when they are sleeping. Although research has not attributed the cause of teeth grinding to any single factor, pain and discomfort from colds, ear infections, allergies, and other ailments may cause children to unwittingly grind their teeth. Problems in sleeping, an abnormal bite, and crooked or missing teeth are also thought to be causal factors in bruxism, according to the ADA. Psychological factors, such as stress and anxiety, should not be overlooked. A change in routine



Protect Your Kids From the Daily Grind



(such as switching schools or the birth of a younger sibling) or worries about an upcoming test or soccer game can be very stressful for youngsters who have yet to develop healthy coping mechanisms. And this stress can result in grinding.

In children, bruxism can be considered a nervous habit similar to thumb and finger sucking or lip biting. And like thumb and finger sucking, bruxism can often be an unconscious occurrence, meaning that children aren't aware that they are grinding their teeth. Unfortunately, bruxism is also similar to thumb and finger sucking in that prolonged grinding can result in damage to the teeth and jaws.

Damage to a child's primary dentition, or baby teeth, from teeth grinding can range from slight wear on the surface of the molars and/or incisors to severe wear of the entire dentition. In most cases, such wear is not painful to the child because the loss of tooth structure takes place over a relatively long period of time. However, in some severe cases of bruxism, tooth sensitivity and even nerve infection may occur.

Fortunately, in the majority of cases of pediatric teeth grinding, the habit disappears as the child ages. However, parents who suspect their child is experiencing bruxism should be sure to contact their dentist for an evaluation. Based on the diagnosis, the dentist may recommend a custom-made nightguard to be worn during sleep. The nightguard fits over the teeth on one jaw and acts as a buffer between the upper and lower teeth, absorbing the pressure of biting and preventing further damage to the tooth surface. If stress is considered to be a factor, parents should talk with the child to help allay his or her fears and adopt calming habits before bedtime, such as taking a warm bath, reading a book, or going for a relaxing walk. 

Bruxism

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For more information on bruxism or your child's oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit www.massdental.org.