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## Preschools Add Brush-and-Spit to Day



Cheryl Senter for The New York Times

Four-year-olds practice brushing their teeth at the Basic Beginnings center in Haverhill, Mass.

By **KATIE ZEZIMA**  
Published: January 28, 2010

**HAVERTHILL, Mass.** — The twelve 4-year-olds sat in a corner, small hands clasping toothbrushes. Isaac and Aaron brandished them like swords, stabbing each other in the side. Jacky rubbed his into the carpet. Abigail squirmed, and Chayleece jumped up and down.

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“You ready? Start brushing!” said Massiel Diaz, their teacher at the Basic Beginnings day care center. “Brush, brush your teeth — at least two times a day. Clean, clean, clean — fighting tooth decay,” Ms. Diaz sang out, as the children moved the brushes up, down and around, connecting with teeth occasionally but also with their face and nose.

And then they swallowed the pea-size dots of toothpaste — bubblegum-flavored “Dora the Explorer” Colgate.

Massachusetts is the first state to add toothbrush time to the color-nap-snack-and-play routine of preschools, requiring that all children who eat a meal at day care, or attend for more than four hours, brush their teeth during class and be educated about oral health.

The regulations, which went into effect last week, are being praised by some parents and caregivers while causing a tempest in a toothbrush for others, according to schools and chat rooms.

“I don’t want someone’s hand in my child’s mouth,” said Sarah Brodsky, a teacher at First

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### On thin ice

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Path Day Care in Watertown and mother of 4-month-old Noah. "It's a little too much" government intervention, Ms. Brodsky added.

"JG," posting on [Boston.com](#)'s blog Moms Are Talking About, agreed that the government might have overstepped its bounds: "We don't need the state mandating every little thing in our lives. Let parents be parents," adding, "The kids can't even reach a sink."

Parents who feel strongly about the regulation can opt out, said Sherri Killins, commissioner of the Department of Early Education and Care, which oversees day care centers and established the regulations to help stem dental disease. According to a 2003 state study, one in four Massachusetts kindergartners have dental disease.

"Poor [dental care](#) is the most common, chronic childhood ailment, and if untreated can result in pain, infection and other devastating impacts on a child's health," Ms. Killins said.

At the Basic Beginnings Learning and Development Center here, about 40 miles north of Boston, the director, Deborah Ramos, started training her charges in early January, so glitches would be worked out by the time the regulations went into effect.

Staff members use a soft bristle to swab the gums of infants. Like other day care centers statewide, Basic Beginnings is choosing to apply so little toothpaste that it is safe for children to swallow, a practice used in Head Start programs, which mandated tooth brushing in 2006.

Ms. Ramos said there was some [apprehension](#), but teachers quickly worked brushing into the postlunch routine.

Dr. David S. Samuels, a periodontist in Andover and president of the Massachusetts Dental Society, which supports the rule, said in order for the program to be effective, teachers need to help children without the motor skills do it correctly. He is also worried about the spread of germs through toothbrushes and spitting.

Alexandra Pikus, director of the First Path Day Care in Watertown, said she was still working out the details of how they will herd 55 preschoolers into position. "We need to start early," Ms. Pikus said. "We're supposed to have rest time, and now we have to eat a little earlier so there's enough time for the children to brush their teeth. It's not the happiest moment."

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: February 2, 2010**

*An article on Friday about a new requirement by Massachusetts that many day-care centers add toothbrush time to their routines misspelled the surname of the director of the First Path Day Care in Watertown, Mass. She is Alexandra Pikus, not Picus. The article also misstated the number of preschoolers at First Path. There are 55, not 60. And because of an editing error, the article misstated the name of a Boston.com blog that posted many opinions about the toothbrush requirement. It is Moms Are Talking About — not Moms Nation.*

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