



The Daily Grind Can Begin at Any Age

There are many reasons to be stressed these days: The 2016 presidential election, the Zika virus, and the economy, to name a few. As a result, this stress sometimes manifests itself in physical symptoms. One of them is teeth grinding, also known as **bruxism**, and kids are just as susceptible as adults.

Teeth grinding is an oral habit that involves clenching and grinding of the teeth. It can occur either during the day or at night and often goes unnoticed by the person doing it. Some common symptoms include waking up with a headache, toothache, or earache. You may also have tenderness in your face, jaw muscles, and/or your teeth or gums. During a dental visit, your dentist or hygienist may detect that your teeth, fillings, or crowns are worn down.

And while children may not have to worry about the same things adults do, they, too, can experience their own forms of stress. This means that they also 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.

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 often only occurs during sleep, parents need to pay extra attention to suss out 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 yet to attribute 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 American Dental Association. Psychological factors, such as stress and anxiety, should not be overlooked. A change in routine (e.g., due to 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 teeth grinding, which can lead to oral health problems.

In children, bruxism can be considered a nervous habit similar to thumb sucking or lip biting. And like thumb sucking, teeth grinding 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 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 bruxism cases, tooth sensitivity and even infection of the tooth's nerve 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 encourage the child to adopt calming habits before bedtime, such as taking a warm bath, reading a book, or going for a relaxing walk.