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The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

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Your comments and suggestions regarding **WORD OF MOUTH** are always welcome. All correspondence and requests for additional copies may be sent to:

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Kids' Oral Health: Who's the **BOSS?**

Parents of young children know how difficult it can be to get them to do anything. Whether it's making sure they pick up their toys, eat at least half of what's on their plate, or take a nap—parents often have their work cut out for them. When pushed to do something they don't want to do, kids may say "You're not the boss of me!" But given their age, children are not always capable of knowing what is best for them to help them lead happier and healthier lives, and so parents must steer their youngsters down the right path. And that includes helping them to develop good oral hygiene skills, such as brushing their teeth twice a day. When it comes to your child's oral health, you are indeed the boss.



It may come as a surprise, but good brushing habits should begin at birth. Parents can use a wet washcloth or gauze to wipe the baby's gums. An infant's primary, or baby, teeth typically come in anywhere from six months to one year of age, and a pattern of regular oral cleansing in the morning and before bedtime should be established. Children are creatures of habit: Just like the bedtime rituals that help them nod off, adopting a regular toothbrushing routine from an early age will accustom children to expect their teeth to be brushed at these times.

The recommended goal of a two-minute brushing routine may be more challenging with a younger child, so parents need to set a good example. If children see Mom and Dad regularly brushing and flossing, they are more likely to emulate this behavior. For the more stubborn preschooler, a "team" approach might be helpful. Using this method, the child brushes his or her own teeth first, followed by a parental once-over. This way, the child's need for independence can be acknowledged but Mom or Dad can still be the "brushing boss." This guidance is crucial because not many young children know how to brush their teeth properly.

What about flossing? Removing food particles from between the teeth is also important for preventive oral care, and flossing should be introduced to young children; however, it should be performed by the parent, preferably before brushing. The parent can sit on a chair or the toilet seat and have the child face forward, which allows for better control of the child's head and increased visibility.

Parents will also want to make sure that their child visits the dentist twice yearly for routine checkups. These dental visits—which are not unlike wellness visits to the pediatrician—should start within six months of the eruption of the baby's first tooth and no later than the child's first birthday, according to the Massachusetts Dental Society, the American Dental Association, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and the Massachusetts Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. Parents may wonder why they need to schedule dental visits at that age: What sort of dental problems could a baby or toddler have? These early dental visits allow the dentist to check for tooth decay and other things that may adversely affect the teeth and gums, including habits like thumb sucking, which can cause the teeth to misalign. Another bonus: Routine dental checkups teach children that there's nothing to fear at the dentist's office.

When dealing with young children, it takes persistence and patience to help lay the foundation for a lifetime habit of regular oral care.

