

Learning Good Oral Health Habits: A Lifelong Journey

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Because I grew up in India, a third world country where dental health is not given even remotely the same importance as medical health, I learned toothbrushing at a later age than many of my classmates. I must have been around the age of four and well grown into my primary dentition when my parents finally became serious enough about teaching me how to brush. Before this time, although my parents had tried to teach me brushing, they were never firm enough about it for me to follow through. In fact, when I would cry from the pain the hard bristled toothbrush was causing on my sensitive gums, my father would try to relieve my anxiety by saying, "It's okay honey, tigers don't need to brush." What he meant was that if I was going to be fierce and confident like a tiger, I need not bother with dainty things like brushing. Due to the outdated and ignorant views of my family, my bad oral habits continued.

It was not until I started attending pre-school and my teacher at the time, Ms. Bukul, noticed I still had food residue sticking to my teeth from the night before that she sent home a strict warning to my parents that if I did not start brushing soon, I would be dismissed from school. Because Ms. Bukul was concerned about both my own oral health and the negative image I was sending my classmates about appearance and self-care, she decided to take this drastic measure. Well, it certainly worked. Like most Indian parents, my mom and dad were much sterner about my education than my need for oral hygiene; thus, they finally decided to step in and teach me the proper way to brush.

When I first started brushing, my mom went nice and slow and gave me only the front teeth to brush myself while brushing the side teeth for me afterwards. Even then, I remember I would give my mom a hard time and refuse to brush with paste because its taste made me gag. I was particularly adamant about my mom not touching my molars and premolars because I hated the feeling of having my cheek stretched by a rigid toothbrush. My mom, being a smart parent, decided to come up with a compromise, or rather, an offer that I couldn't refuse. She would allow me to stay up past my bedtime and watch my favorite horror series with her if I had made sure to brush twice that day. Because that show was very special to me, I would hold my breath and count until 30 to brush my teeth in both the morning and the evening, just so that I could finally receive my treat at the end of it.

As I grew older, I learned that brushing is actually a privilege that people who can't afford dental hygiene products or clean water are deprived of. I started

to appreciate the “just clean” feeling that I felt that the minty toothpaste left after swiping and cleaning all the gunk and residue out from my oral cavity. Because Indian dishes are often drenched in odorous ingredients such as onion and garlic, I began to relish brushing as a way of relieving some of that bad breath before I went to see my friends and family. I also learned to incorporate all portions of my mouth when brushing, including outer, inner and biting surfaces of my teeth, as well as my tongue, something my mom had never taught me.

Although my parents and teachers did definitely introduce me to brushing to maintain oral health, I’m appalled that they never taught me the importance of flossing and mouthwash. To their credit actually, I believe they were ignorant of even the existence of such dental hygiene products themselves, so there was no way they could have taught me about them. In fact, for many Indians, mouthwash is still a discovery because it is not readily available or publicly advertised. Therefore, for me, discovering mouthwash through a T.V. commercial for Listerine was the “aha, I finally get it” moment that turned my life around. Before this time, I had no idea that there was such a quick fix to halitosis that could be bought over the counter. At first, I bought the mouthwash with my own allowance as a teenager because my mom wasn’t too happy about spending six dollars on a blue liquid that made her mouth sting. However, as I began using it more and more, and saw my foul breath going away, my family all decided to give it a try and began appreciating and incorporating it into their daily healthcare routine.

Flossing was another self-discovery for me, but a particularly enjoyable one. I remember as a tween, I used to “sweep the gunk” out of my teeth using the fallen hair strands from my mom’s hair. It just felt like such a pleasurable and relieving experience to be able clean the meat fibers that had become stuck between my teeth and were bothering me. At the time, I didn’t realize that what I was doing was flossing and neither did my mom. However, she decided to get me some clean thread to clean in-between teeth simply because it seemed more sanitary than using her fallen hair. It was not until much later, when I came to America, that I discovered that there was actually such a thing as dental floss, designed specifically to clean those hard to reach interproximal areas, and that it came in many varieties, including flavored ones. I’ve learned that I still enjoy flossing as much as I did as a child because of the deep cleaning satisfaction it provides me.

Because my parents were always very hit or miss regarding my oral health education due to their own limited knowledge on the subject, I became more proactive about not letting the same happen to my brother. Since I’m fourteen years older than him, I decided to teach him everything I knew about dental hygiene. When my brother would refuse to brush and floss, and my mom gave into his temper tantrums, I decided to take on the role of the strict parent who would reinforce health standards in the house. I would forcefully sit him down, open his mouth and brush his teeth for him when he would refuse to brush them himself for any period longer than four days. Of course, that didn’t work as planned since no one can overpower a biting two year old, so I then took to the reward method to teach him how to brush. Much like my parents who bribed me with my favorite

show, I decided to bribe him with pizza. He would get an entire pizza party with all the fixings every Friday if he had been good the previous week, brushing twice and flossing daily. I realized that the reward method worked like a charm. Abdul soon began brushing and flossing even without the added incentive of receiving pizza at the end of the week.

I imagine that the first step towards teaching kids how to brush and maintain oral hygiene is always the hardest. Once they overcome this initial anxiety and awkwardness, most kids realize that they actually enjoy the acts of brushing, flossing and rinsing and they particularly enjoy the just clean feeling it provides them afterwards. Therefore, it is imperative for parents and caregivers to not be lenient in this initial stage of health education and not give into kids' unruly demands to stay brush-free. Whether they choose the reward method, as I did with my brother, or the punishment method, as my pre-k teacher did with my parents and me, the main goal remains to teach a child oral health standards early. Looking back, I believe my pre-k teacher, Ms. Bukul, may have been the most influential person in my life because if it weren't for her, I would have lost more than 50% of my teeth and gums to cavities and periodontitis a long time ago. I only hope that I can be as influential and teach young children the importance of brushing, flossing, and rinsing as a dental hygienist in the near future.

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