

when toddlers grind their teeth

By Lisa Marie Metzler

Have you ever noticed your sleeping angel nestled under her cozy blankets grinding her teeth – and wonder why she is doing it? For the most part when young children grind their teeth at night, it is a normal occurrence. Although teeth grinding could slowly damage the enamel of the teeth, baby teeth do not remain in place long enough for that to be a problem for most children.

"In children, [teeth grinding] usually isn't a concern because the habit usually stops after two peak periods," says Dr. Debra King, dentist at the Atlanta Center for Cosmetic Dentistry. "Those two periods are as the baby teeth arrive in very young children and again around age 6 as the permanent teeth begin to come in."

According to the American Dental Association, one in three young children grind their teeth. Bruxism is the medical term for the grinding of teeth or clenching of jaws, especially during sleep or when stressed. In some cases, parents may even notice a child grind his teeth during the daytime when he is teething or experiencing ear pain.

According to Dr. Jeffrey Ganeles, a periodontist practicing in Boca Raton, Fla., bruxism is a natural occurrence for most children and need not be a concern for most parents. "It is an adaptation for the brain and neuromuscular system to locate the position of the teeth as the child's teeth erupt and the jaws grow," Dr. Ganeles says. "Think of bruxism as a method of programming the brain and muscles to the teeth."

Can Bruxism Become Serious?

When Reenie Smith's son was 2, he started grinding his teeth. Smith, of Redlands, Calif., didn't expect her son's teeth grinding to continue long term or to cause any problems.

Unfortunately, by the time he was 6 1/2, the problem warranted a visit to the dentist. "Eventually he ground his teeth to the point that they were getting shorter, and one of

the teeth split from left to right along the bottom edge and had to be epoxied by the dentist," Smith says.

The Smiths' dentist determined her son's bruxism was caused by his under bite and was the result of poor alignment. "The problem has gone away for now," Smith says. "He lost all his baby teeth, and we are waiting for the permanent teeth to come in to see whether or not we will still have the grinding problem later."

Poor alignment, such as Smith's son experienced, can be developmental or hereditary. "Most inherited problems can be anticipated by looking at the facial structure of the parents," Dr. Ganeles says. "But if the child develops habits like thumb- or finger-sucking, or mouth-breathing due to nasal obstruction, facial structure can be altered. Habit-related tooth or jaw alignment alterations should be evaluated by a pediatric dentist or orthodontist when they are noticed, regardless of age."

Smith adds that she and her husband sometimes grind their teeth at night, and her husband uses a mouth guard to help eliminate his grinding. In fact, if a parent grinds teeth at night, the chances a child will do the same are greater. When permanent teeth come in, grinding usually stops because permanent teeth are more sensitive to clenching and pain.

If the problem persists, a temporary appliance like a nightly mouth guard can be used, although this is not usually necessary with preschool children. The appliance is similar to a plastic mouth guard used by an athlete to protect teeth. The guard is molded to your child's teeth to ensure a good and comfortable fit. It may take some time to adjust to the new appliance, but the teeth grinding habit may be broken quickly, making the appliance no longer necessary.

Is Bruxism Caused by Stress?

If your child's teeth have become worn down or if they are complaining of pain or sensitivity in the teeth or jaw, you should consult a dentist. If poor alignment is ruled out, then stress may be what is causing the nighttime grinding.

Hannah Hayes of Chicago, Ill., worries about her 7-year-old son, who has been grinding his teeth so much that they are now barely visible. He also chews his clothes,

fingernails and fingers. "He's an outwardly happy, secure kid and always has been," Hayes says. "There's nothing that warrants concern about stress, except his chewing."

Dr. King notes that most cases of bruxism have a psychological component. Even small children have anxiety and stress. Missing a treasured toy, a change in daycare provider or even arguing between parents can be very worrisome to young children.

"In cases where stress is the main reason for bruxism, the parent should address why that situation is stressing their child," Dr. King says. By talking to your preschooler about her day, you should be able to pick up clues as to what is troubling her. It's best not to focus on the teeth grinding itself, but the emotions the child is feeling. Once identified, you can work on eliminating the stress causing the nighttime teeth grinding.

"Anything relaxing before bed, like a warm bath, peaceful music or a massage, can be helpful," Dr. King says. Above all, don't criticize your child or wake her to stop the grinding.

If basic stress relievers don't work and your child continues to grind her teeth at night and is having trouble sleeping or just not acting like herself, then you may want to consider talking with a psychologist to determine the source of the stress causing the nighttime grinding.

Bruxism and TMJ

If chronic bruxism is not addressed by a dentist or physician, temporomandibular joint dysfunction (TMJ) can be the eventual result. The constant grinding and clenching of teeth at night, even when done during childhood, can cause damage to the temporomandibular joint. Symptoms include morning headaches (from a nighttime of grinding), clicking or popping noise when opening the jaws or while chewing and general discomfort or pain in the jaw area or directly in front of the ear.

"Temporomandibular disorders are almost unheard of in children and should not be a concern of parents," says Dr. Jeffrey Ganeles, a periodontist practicing in Boca Raton, Fla. However, if you suspect your child has TMJ, consult an orthodontist or dentist.