

Bruxism and kids: When sleeping becomes a grind

By KIM GLOVER, R.D.H.

Have you ever walked past your child's bedroom on a quiet night and heard an awful noise? While some kids are sleeping soundly, their jaws are hard at work ... grinding teeth. Let's look at this a little closer.

Why does this happen? We don't always know. Research indicates that hyperactive children and kids with certain medical conditions such as cerebral palsy are more likely to grind their teeth. Some doctors say stress and anxiety also contribute to grinding (bruxism).

Kids may grind their teeth while cutting new

teeth, which happens from about age six months to two years, and again around age six to twelve years.

Is it common? Yes. Anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of kids grind their teeth at some point during

childhood; usually while sleeping. Most kids outgrow this by their teens.

Is it harmful? Sometimes kids' teeth actually chip and become shorter as they grind. This can affect a child's bite and, in some cases,

the bite may need to be corrected with orthodontics. Some extreme grinders may need to have fillings done or replaced as they grind their teeth shorter; in other cases, a tooth or two may need a crown. Don't forget that baby molars need to last until age ten or twelve to save space for permanent teeth to come in. It is

important to keep the baby teeth in good condition.

Can this hurt my child's jaw muscles or cause headaches? You bet! Anytime muscles are contracted over and over, it can cause sore muscles. (Imagine doing biceps curls all night – you would wake up pretty sore.) Sore jaw and facial muscles from grinding teeth can lead to headaches and earaches.

Try this to find the muscles involved in clenching and grinding teeth: take your fingertips and hold them on the sides of your face, about 1-2 inches in front of your ears, and below the jaw joint. Clench your teeth over and over, and you should feel the masseter muscles flex. Now try this in the temple area, between where your eyebrows end and your hairline begins. The muscles flex there, too. If you press those areas, do they feel tender? If so, you may be grind-



Family Health

ing or clenching your teeth in your sleep, too.

What can be done about it? A calming routine before and at bedtime may help improve sleep and reduce grinding. Massage has been proven to improve sleep quality, so you can give your child a little back-rub at bedtime. Don't forget to do a gentle massage for the facial and jaw muscles mentioned above.

What about a nightguard to protect the teeth? Teens and adults can wear plastic nightguards (available at the drugstore and custom-made from your dental office) to prevent teeth from being damaged while grinding. Until the age of twelve or so, kids are losing their baby teeth and their permanent teeth are growing in. This makes it almost impossible to get a custom-made nightguard to fit for very long. Besides, wearing a nightguard can be a real choking hazard for a child, so they are usually not recommended for younger kids.

Nothing good can come of tooth grinding, can it? Actually, some researchers think that jaw bones grow stronger and wider during the process of tooth grinding. So it may help your child develop a nice, wide smile.

Ask your dentist at your child's next checkup if you are concerned about your child's tooth grinding.

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