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BRUXISM AND CHILDREN

What is Bruxism?

Bruxism is the technical term for the clenching or grinding of teeth. It is an involuntary behavior which most frequently occurs at night while we sleep.

Bruxism is often seen in children. Studies have shown that one in every three children grind their teeth at some time during their childhood. The two peak periods are as the baby teeth arrive in very young children and again at five or six as the permanent teeth begin to come in.

Why do some children grind their teeth?

No one knows for certain why some children grind their teeth. Some researchers believe that it is because the child's top and bottom teeth do not fit together comfortably, especially when new teeth are coming in. Other researchers have concluded that children grind in response to pain, such as from earaches, colds, or teething. Still other researchers have found that some children grind or clench when they feel tense, fearful, or angry (like with the arrival of a new sibling, caregiver, or teacher). Lastly, studies suggest that some grinding may be attributed to allergies, nutritional deficiencies, facial or oral trauma, or physical or psychological issues.

Does bruxism go away?

Childhood bruxism is usually outgrown by adolescence. However, if there is a family history of bruxism, there is a higher than normal chance that the behavior will continue into adulthood.

What are the dental problems associated with bruxism?

Generally, bruxism does not hurt a child's teeth. However, in extreme cases, nighttime bruxism can wear down tooth enamel, chip teeth, increase temperature sensitivity, cause headaches or earaches, and cause severe facial pain and jaw problems, such as temporomandibular joint disease (TMJ).

In most cases, the greatest impact of bruxism is on the child's parents who are troubled to hear the grinding sound and concerned about its impact on the child's teeth.

How is bruxism treated?

Most children outgrow bruxism, but it should be monitored by a child's parents and pediatric dentist. In severe cases, when bruxism makes a child's face or jaw sore, or teeth are being severely damaged, a special night guard may be necessary. The night guard is similar to the protective mouthpieces worn by athletes and can be prescribed by the pediatric dentist.

Fortunately in most children, bruxism is a passing phenomena which disappears on its own with no adverse effects.

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