

# WHY DO CHILDREN GRIND THEIR TEETH?

Tooth grinding in children can be a normal response to jaw growth which resolves on its own over time, or it can indicate more serious problems with your child's dentition and airways.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **1. *What is Tooth Grinding in children?***

Tooth grinding or "bruxism" is a nonfunctional grinding or gnashing of teeth together. This can occur during the day or night. Often, the first indication is the noise created by the child grinding their teeth during sleep. The parent may also notice the teeth getting shorter over time.

### **2. *What causes Tooth Grinding in children?***

There are numerous theories to explain childhood bruxism. One theory suggests a psychological component. Stress in a new environment, stress at home, or changes at school increase the risk for tooth grinding. There is also some evidence that when children experience inner ear pressure changes (like that experienced in an airplane during take-off) the child may move his jaw to relieve this pressure. Another potential cause is the unstable bite children have while their baby teeth are erupting, becoming loose and being replaced by permanent teeth. Thus, the grinding may be merely the jaw trying to find a comfortable position.

Tooth grinding is common in children that snore and/or breathe through their mouths. This suggests that there could be a connection between sleep bruxism and upper airway obstruction causing obstructive sleep apnea. In children with sleep apnea, the tongue and tissues in the back of the mouth fall backwards during sleep and block the airway. When the airway is blocked, the child may awaken many times during the night to gasp for air. This cycle deprives the brain of adequate oxygen and interrupts restful sleep.

Another connection has been made between teeth grinding and enlarged tonsils, which is strongly linked to upper airway obstruction. Removing the tonsils and adenoids has been shown to lessen teeth grinding in some children.

Commonly prescribed medications such as antidepressants may also contribute to tooth grinding in children and teenagers. The number of children taking antidepressants is growing, so this is an important factor to consider when treating children who grind their teeth. Amphetamines used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are also associated with tooth grinding.

### **3. *Is Tooth Grinding in children a normal part of my child's growth and development?***

Tooth grinding is actually a very common habit among children, particularly those under the age of 11. It is so common that many people consider it "normal" behavior. It may be cause for concern when the tooth grinding causes severe tooth wear, pain or trouble sleeping.

### **4. *What will happen if I do nothing about my child's Tooth Grinding?***

In most cases, children who grind their teeth do not require any treatment. The good news is that children usually outgrow grinding their teeth between the ages of 9 and 12. If, however, other signs and symptoms are observed such as upper airway obstruction, chronic snoring, enlarged adenoids, or wear of permanent teeth, further evaluation may be necessary.