

MOUTH BREATHING 101

“Close your mouth, please, Michael. We are not a codfish.” So says Mary Poppins, the “practically perfect in every way” nanny to her young charge, who stands with jaw dropped and mouth gaping open in amazement at her magical way of tidying the nursery. Parents of habitual mouth breathers may have exhausted more phrases than Mary Poppins trying to remind their children to close their mouths and breathe through their noses. Why should we care if our children are mouth breathers? If the mouth stays open, then the teeth stop fitting together properly. Habitual mouth breathing can be a chronic problem that if left untreated, can result in abnormal growth in the jaws and/or face (often referred to as horsy faces), possibly requiring orthognathic surgery. It can also cause TMJ or other dental problems down the road.

A normal “at rest” position for the mouth is lips together, teeth slightly apart, with tongue touching the palate while swallowing. If you notice your children have their mouths open constantly while at rest, are complaining of dry mouths, or snoring and mouth breathing regularly while sleeping, further investigation and treatment are indicated. Most habitual mouth breathing is caused by increased air resistance in the nose. Enlarged adenoids, chronic sinus inflammation, deviated septum and allergies are among the most common causes of mouth breathing, and an evaluation by a pediatric ENT is the best course for solving those issues. If the mouth breathing can be addressed and corrected early, then the resulting malocclusions, such as cross bites and open bites, can be corrected by orthodontic treatment (small braces or expander, depending on issue). As always, an evaluation by an orthodontist as early as age 7 is the best course of action to determine if the problem is a habit to be broken, or a compensation mechanism indicative of a bigger issue.

Just as orthodontic treatment alone will be in vain if the underlying cause is left untreated, treating the origin won’t fix the bite and dental problems caused by the mouth breathing. Getting the proper treatment for mouth breathing will put their orthodontic and dental health on the right track faster than you can say *“Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”!*

-Carl K. Walker, D.M.D., M.S.