

Protect Your Child's Teeth

The smile on your child's face is priceless. There's a lot you can -- and should -- do to help keep it that way. In fact, maintaining your child's teeth, gums, and mouth is key to his or her overall health.⁸

Fortunately, caring for your child's oral health is not difficult when you arm yourself with some vital dental information.² Here are some steps you can take to help your child achieve and maintain good oral health.

Teach Your Child Good Habits

Parents should focus on children's drinking, eating, and tooth-cleaning habits at a very early age.¹

For example, dental experts say parents should never give babies, particularly those who have teeth, bottles with milk, juice, or formula at nap time or bedtime. In older kids, parents should limit sugary, sticky snacks between meals and encourage kids to choose fruits, vegetables, and other healthy alternatives.^{1,4}

Tooth-cleaning habits should start even before children's first teeth come in.¹ After each feeding wipe the baby's gums. Begin brushing your child's teeth when the first tooth erupts. Clean and massage gums in areas that remain toothless, and begin flossing when all the baby teeth have erupted, usually by age 2 or 2-1/2.⁴

As children get older, parents can teach them how to brush and floss their own teeth. Preschool-age kids can start using a small, pea-size amount of toothpaste containing fluoride.¹

Put an End to Thumb Sucking

Most children give up this habit on their own by age 4, with no harm done to their teeth. If your child still has a sucking habit after age 4, tell your dentist. After permanent teeth come in, sucking may cause problems with alignment of the teeth.^{1,5}

Be Ready When Teeth Come In

Baby teeth usually start coming in by age 6 months and are just as important as the permanent adult teeth. It's important to take care of baby teeth because they hold space in the jaws for permanent teeth that are developing under the gums. Children's permanent teeth generally start coming in between the ages of 6 and 7.^{3,4,7?}

Start Dental Visits Early

Unless a problem is suspected, the American Dental Association recommends that a dentist examine a child within six months of the eruption of the first tooth and no later than the first birthday.³ Children should see a dentist twice a year unless the dentist asks to see them more frequently to monitor problems.⁶

Dentists' offices provide a full range of services to promote good oral health even at early ages. For example, dental specialists can:^{1,2,6}

- Clean teeth
- Remove plaque
- Examine the teeth, mouth, and jaw
- Apply, repair, or replace dental sealants to prevent tooth decay
- Evaluate children's fluoride needs and recommend appropriate fluoride products or supplements for children who do not have access to fluoridated water
- Perform a dental risk assessment by evaluating children's diet, hygiene habits, overall structure of the teeth, and parents' experience with decay

¹ "Dental Hygiene: How to Care for Your Child's Teeth." American Academy of Family Physicians.

<http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/children/parents/kidshealthy/healthy-choice/227.html>. Accessed 2009.

² "Oral Health: Preventing Cavities, Gum Disease and Tooth Loss." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/publications/aag/doh.htm>. Accessed 2009.

³ "Oral Health Topics: Baby Teeth." American Dental Association. <http://www.ada.org/public/topics/baby.asp>. Accessed 2009.

⁴ "Oral Health Topics: Early Childhood Tooth Decay (Baby Bottle Tooth Decay) Frequently Asked Questions." American Dental Association. https://www.ada.org/public/topics/decay_childhood_faq.asp. Accessed 2009.

⁵ "Oral Health Topics: Thumbsucking." American Dental Association. <http://www.ada.org/public/topics/thumbsucking.asp>. Accessed 2009.

⁶ "Regular Dental Visits." American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. <http://www.aapd.org/publications/brochures/regdent.asp>. Accessed 2009.

⁷ "Tooth Eruption: The Permanent Teeth." American Dental Association. http://www.ada.org/prof/resources/pubs/jada/patient/patient_58.pdf. Accessed 2009.

⁸ "Trends in Oral Health Status: United States, 1988-1994 and 1999-2004." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 2007, vol. 11, no. 248. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_11/sr11_248.pdf. Accessed 2009.