



Smile Savers: Keeping Your Child's Teeth Healthy

It may be easy to dismiss dental care for young children as unnecessary. After all, it may seem they're only baby teeth. But these teeth are important to a child's development because they help children chew food and speak clearly. These little chompers also hold space so permanent teeth can grow in straight. Starting good dental health habits when children are young will protect their smiles now – and in the future.

In recognition of February as National Children's Dental Health Month, First 5 Contra Costa provides these answers to Frequently Asked Questions about how to care for your child's teeth.

What is baby bottle tooth decay?

- Also known as early childhood caries, baby bottle tooth decay is caused when children are allowed to go to bed with a bottle of milk, formula or juice. When this happens, the sugar from the liquid stays in contact with the baby's teeth for several hours, breaking down the enamel and discoloring teeth. Severe cases can lead to cavities and the removal of teeth.

To prevent baby bottle tooth decay, parents should never allow infants to fall asleep with a bottle and should encourage children to begin drinking from a cup as they near their first birthday.

When should children start brushing their teeth?

- Brushing teeth is one of the easiest ways to prevent cavities. That's why parents should begin brushing their children's teeth regularly as soon as the first tooth comes in, which is usually around 6 to 12 months. Although children can be taught how to brush when they are toddlers, parents should continue brushing a child's teeth until he or she is 6 years old.

When should children first visit a dentist?

- The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends parents schedule a visit to the dentist when their child's first tooth comes in. After that first visit, children should have a dental checkup at least once a year.

What kind of toothbrush and toothpaste should children use?

- When choosing a toothbrush for your child, look for round-ended bristles that clean while also being gentle on the gums. To make daily brushing more fun, use a brightly colored toothbrush.

Once children are 2 or 3 years old, they can begin using a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste. Make sure they are supervised and taught to spit the toothpaste out instead of swallowing it.

When should children begin flossing?

- Flossing is an important part of dental care because it removes food particles and plaque that gets lodged between teeth. Parents should begin flossing their children's teeth around 4 years of age or when two teeth start touching each other.

What is fluoride, and is supplemental fluoride safe for children?

- Fluoride is one of the best ways to help prevent tooth decay as the naturally occurring mineral helps strengthen the tooth's enamel. If the water supply in your area does not contain a proper amount of fluoride or your child only drinks bottled water, your pediatrician may prescribe fluoride supplements. Be sure to follow the recommended dosage because too much fluoride can cause white spots on teeth.

By practicing good dental habits with children at home, visiting the dentist regularly and following a balanced diet, parents can help keep their children smiling with confidence.