

By Jean Sheff

askthespecialist

Baby Teeth Are Important!



Martin J. Davis, D.D.S., has made it a top priority to educate parents and children on the importance of oral health.

QUICK QUIZ

Which is worse for your child's teeth, a cookie or a caramel candy?

The cookie is the worst choice! A caramel candy dissolves and does not linger on the teeth. Cookie pieces stay in contact with the teeth longer and some particles even get caught in between the teeth where they can begin to cause cavities.

Martin J. Davis, D.D.S. is on a mission. As spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), a pediatric dentist and father of two, Davis seeks to educate the 97 percent of parents who have no idea that their child should visit a pediatric dentist by their first birthday.

"I have heard parents say, 'baby teeth aren't important, they are just going to fall out anyway.' Nothing could be further from the truth," he says. Consequently, the AAPD has made it a top priority to educate parents on the importance of infant oral health.

Well Care

After a baby is born parents are encouraged to take their infant to a pediatrician for well care visits. There the baby receives the required immunizations and is examined to make sure they are progressing properly.

The same is true of a child's dental needs. At the age of 1 all children should make a well care visit to a pediatric dentist. "The first visit is primarily educational," says Davis. The dentist will assess your child's risk for future dental issues and learn about any genetic predictors that may affect your child's dental health. The dentist also looks to educate the parents on proper oral health care and warn them about some dangerous practices such as allowing a child to fall asleep with a bottle filled with Hawaiian Punch. The visit also acquaints your child with the dentist in a friendly manner, helping to alleviate any possible fears.

"If you don't think it matters consider that children ages 2 to 5 are admitted to the hospital most frequently to have their teeth fixed," says Davis. Currently, 28 percent of children under the age of 5 have cavities, a statistic that has risen over the last decade.

More Than Appearance

Aside from appearance, which alone can affect self-image, the role baby teeth play is very important. "Baby teeth control the growth pattern of the face and can affect a child's speech," says Davis. If the baby teeth become infected the adult teeth that reside below the gum can become misshapen and discolored.

How serious can the health of baby teeth be? Davis shared a real worst-case scenario. A youngster named Diamonte Driever of Maryland was a Medicaid patient

and his parents could not find a doctor who would treat his cavity. The infection ultimately caused a brain abscess, which led to the child's death. If finances are a problem Davis recommends parents contact local hospitals or dental schools, such as those at Columbia and New York University, as dental care there may be more affordable.

The best of all practices is prevention. By introducing proper oral hygiene at a very early age you are helping your child develop good habits which ultimately save them unwanted discomfort and you unnecessary expense.

Proper Practices

Davis has several important recommendations that can help your child have healthy teeth and a beautiful smile.

1 CUT SNACKS – Frequent snacking causes a rise of acid in the mouth, which increases the risk for cavities. Snacks include beverages such as apple juice.

2 STOP USING BOTTLES – Davis says children should be off the bottle by age 1. You should also look to wean them from the sippy cup as soon as possible and refrain from placing a pacifier on a rope around their neck, which in itself is a dangerous practice.

3 START DENTAL HYGIENE AT 6 MONTHS OLD – Clean your baby's teeth with a soft clean washcloth to remove plaque. You can sit down on the floor with the child and do this in a relaxed manner to get the child used to the routine.

4 BRUSH THEIR TEETH – Children do not develop the necessary eye/hand coordination to properly brush their teeth until about age 6, so parents should be prepared to do the brushing.

5 FLUORIDE – Fluoride can promote dental health. Check to see if your tap water is fluorinated. If not, you can obtain fluoride drops for your child. But too much fluoride can cause problems. So if you use toothpaste that also contains fluoride be careful to use a very small amount (pea sized dab) when you brush your child's teeth.

6 SUPERVISE – As your child becomes old enough to brush by themselves make sure to supervise the process. Introduce flossing as soon as permanent teeth appear and space between the teeth make tight contact. ♦

Jean Sheff is Editor of *Westchester Family*.