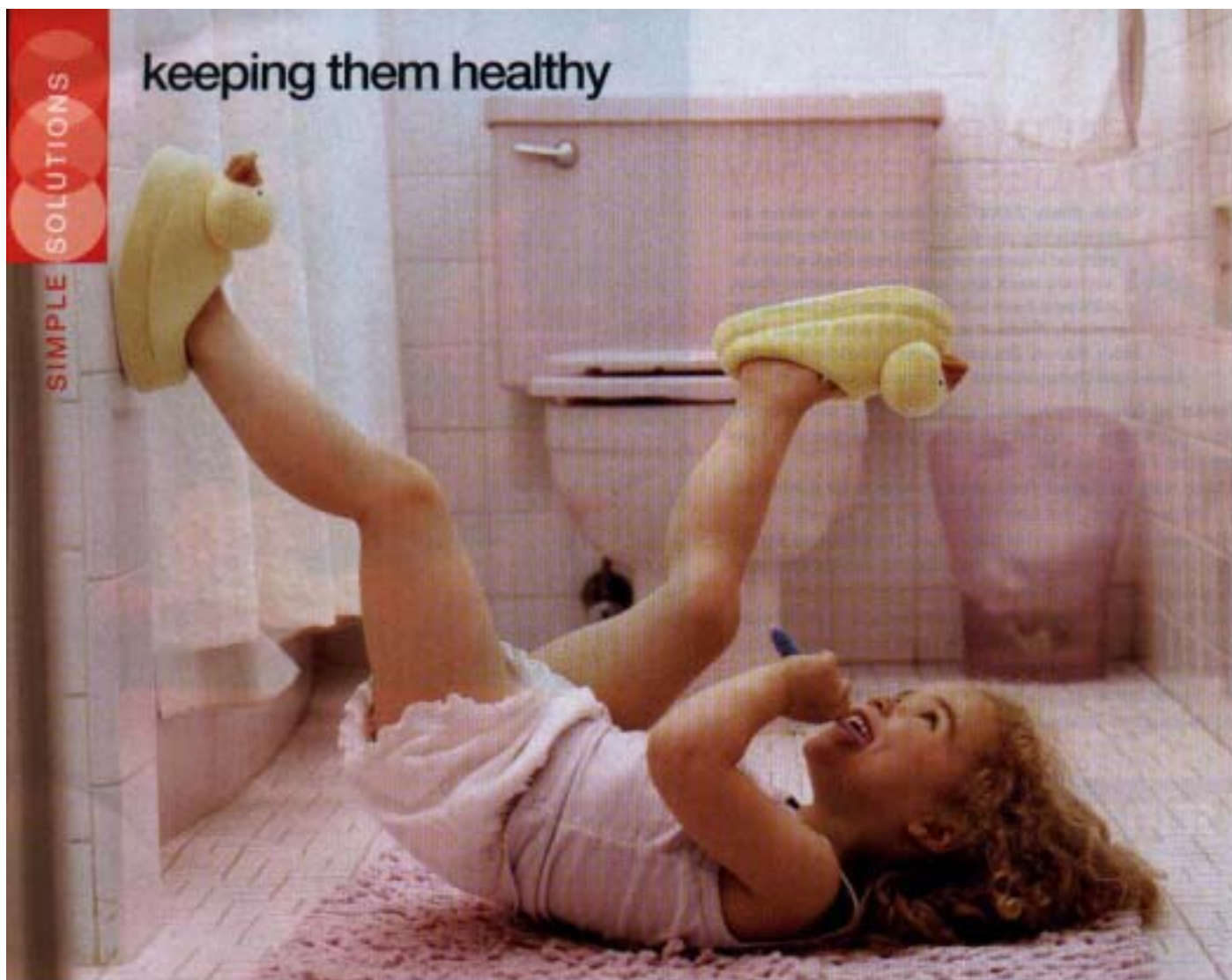


keeping them healthy



Protect your child's teeth: 5 smart moves

The candy your child really must skip, the toothbrush that works best, and other wise advice to keep your little one's smile shining. **BY PHIL GALEWITZ**

When my 18-month-old son, Tanner, was diagnosed with two cavities, I knew who was to blame: not the little boy with the squeaky laugh, but his parents.

Our son's general health has always been a priority. We make sure Tanner gets his vaccinations on time; we're sticklers for having regular medical checkups—but oral health was another matter. My wife nursed him to sleep on more than a few occasions; I confess I let him sip soda now and then; and we hadn't even considered taking

him to the dentist until the pediatrician noticed those cavities. All these things, I would later learn, increased his risk for cavities.

Obviously, my wife and I aren't the only ones not following the rules: Tooth decay is the single most common childhood disease in America, and a recent Surgeon General's report found a "silent epidemic" of oral disease among children.

That's why *Redbook* talked to dentists and hygienists, who shared these prevention pointers.

1 GET YOUR CHILD'S TEETH CHECKED BY HIS FIRST BIRTHDAY.

Yes, it sounds young, but it's necessary. If you don't want to take your child to the dentist before his first birthday, as the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends, do make sure the pediatrician peers at your child's newly sprouted teeth during his one-year well-child visit. Dental problems can begin when the first teeth appear, at 6 to 9 months. "A lot of parents are under the misconception that you can't have any cavities until you

have all your teeth," says Elliott Maser, a pediatric dentist in Bensalem, Pennsylvania. "But the truth is, teeth can start to break down soon after they come in." Food particles trapped between and around the teeth (yes, mashed sweet potatoes stick just as well as grown-up food) combine with bacteria to create an acid that eats away at the teeth, causing cavities. And, if baby teeth are lost to decay, adult teeth may come in improperly (translation: major orthodontia bills later).

By age 3, says the American Academy of Pediatrics, all children should be seen by a pediatric dentist. To locate one, contact the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry at www.aapd.org.

2 DON'T LET YOUR CHILD BRUSH SOLO UNTIL AGE 7.

Sorry, but brushing your child's teeth is your job until his coordination and dexterity are up to snuff. How much of a difference can your brushing make? A study conducted last year found that among 534 5-year-olds, those whose brushing was supervised had 32 percent fewer cavities than those left to brush on their own. Here's what you want to be doing: Place the toothbrush at a 45-degree angle where the gum and teeth meet and use a circular massaging motion around each tooth. "The motion takes the plaque out," says Maria Lopez Howell, a San Antonio dentist and American Dental Association spokeswoman. Be sure to clean the back teeth, which are especially susceptible to plaque buildup and consequently cavities.

3 TOSS THE BOTTLE BY AGE 1 AND THE SIPPY CUP BY AGE 2.

It's often true that nothing relaxes your infant more than sucking milk or juice from a bottle at bedtime. Unfortunately, nothing could be worse for his teeth and gums, dentists say. Studies show that as many as 11 percent of preschool children have cavities caused by sucking on a bottle, which basically bathes the teeth in sugary liquid. If your child is bottle-fed and her mouth is not properly cleaned afterward, plaque accumulates on the teeth and can cause cavities. "Baby-bottle tooth decay is a serious problem that is totally preventable," says Peter Domoto, chairman of pediatric dentistry at the University of Washington

School of Dentistry. If you feel that your child must have a bottle at bedtime, give her one filled with water.

"Moms who nurse their kids to sleep also have to worry about tooth decay," says Michael Hanna, a Pittsburgh pediatric dentist and spokesman for the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Foundation. If you must breast-feed your baby to sleep, at least clean her mouth afterward by gently rubbing a damp washcloth over her teeth and gums.

Incidentally, this risk for decay doesn't go away once your child has graduated to a sippy cup; that's because kids tend to suck on sippy cups for long stretches, keeping their teeth soaked in the sugary drink. Because of this, dentists recommend that you wean your toddler onto a regular cup by age 2; if that's not possible, at least switch to a cup with a pop-up straw or juice boxes, either of which helps reduce the risk for tooth decay.

4 KNOW WHICH FRUIT SNACKS CAN CAUSE TOOTH DECAY.

Think twice before you make rolled fruit snacks a lunchbox staple. Same goes for letting your child regularly grab some gummy fruit candies or dried fruit. "Anything sugary or acidic that stays in the mouth for a long time or adheres to the teeth is bad," says Shirley Gurtkowski, a dental hygienist in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. These kinds of foods feed bacteria, which promote decay because they can't be cleared from the mouth quickly, unlike, say, ice cream.

When your child eats these sticky treats, try this trick: Follow up with a bit of cheese. The calcium in the cheese counteracts the damage caused by the sugar-and-bacteria mixture.

5 CONSIDER DENTAL SEALANTS.

"Sealants are the best-kept secret in dental offices," says Michael Ignelzi, an Ann Arbor, Michigan, dentist and chairman of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's Council on Scientific Affairs. A sealant is a liquid that is brushed onto the chewing surfaces of the back teeth and hardens into an almost invisible, plastic-like barrier that typically lasts several years. This coating protects the grooves and depressions (where food gets trapped) of the teeth from bacteria. Sealants, which are primarily used on permanent teeth, can cost up to \$40 a tooth, but the procedure is usually covered by dental insurance. The application usually takes less than ten minutes and requires no anesthetic.

Despite sealants' effectiveness, only about 20 percent of children have them applied. One reason for their limited use: concern about their safety due to a mid-1990s European study hypothesizing that a chemical (BPA, or bisphenol A) released during the sealant's application could leach into the bloodstream and cause health problems, even raising a person's cancer risk. But this worry was proven unfounded, according to a study in *The Journal of the American Dental Association* that determined that BPA isn't absorbed into the bloodstream. □

5 rules for brushing better

- Buy a soft-bristled brush; hard bristles damage your child's gums.
- Choose a child-size brush with a contoured, easy-to-hold handle.
- Consider a battery-operated toothbrush. They can cost less than \$10, and many dentists believe that the constant vibration loosens plaque better than your child can do on his own once he's brushing solo; in addition, they automatically provide the circular brushing motion that's hard for kids to master. Plus, kids love using them.
- Use fluoridated toothpaste once your child learns to spit after brushing, usually by age 2 or 3. (Before that, water alone on the brush is fine.) Here's why: If your child can't spit out the toothpaste left in his mouth after brushing, he may ingest too much fluoride, which can produce brown stains on the teeth.
- Likewise, use only a pea-size amount—not the glob featured in toothpaste commercials—on your child's toothbrush.