



Taking Care of Baby Teeth

There is a common misconception that baby (primary) teeth aren't important because they are replaced by the permanent teeth. But in fact, baby teeth are very important for a number of reasons. First, they are space holders for permanent teeth. If they are lost prematurely, this can cause severe crowding problems with the permanent teeth leading to braces and/or extraction of permanent teeth later on. Second, they are just like permanent teeth in that when a large cavity invades the nerve of the tooth, it can cause pain, discomfort, and infection (swelling). Unfortunately this can easily happen when dentist offices are closed, leading to a trip to the emergency room, and usually early extraction of the tooth. Small children only have 20 teeth compared to the adult set of 32, so when one is lost, function is compromised.

So what should parents do to tend to those little teeth when they first come through? It is recommended that parents take babies to the dentist shortly after that first tooth comes in. This visit is for a brief exam, but more importantly, education about bottle habits, diet, home care, and fluoride. Baby bottle tooth decay is devastating to the primary teeth and can be avoided. Babies should not be put to bed with a bottle or a sippy cup of anything. Even water in a bedtime bottle can lead to ear infections. The first teeth should be cleaned twice a day with a gauze, washcloth, or infant toothbrush with fluoride-free toothpaste (the toothpaste is optional, but makes the experience more fun for kids because it tastes good). Once a child is about three, and he or she can spit in the sink, a dab of fluoride toothpaste is o.k. to use, as long as it is rinsed and expectorated.

Usually a child is ready for the first dental cleaning at around the time of the third birthday. X-rays can sometimes be taken at this age as well, though unless the child is at high risk for decay, the dentist may wait a year or two to increase child cooperation. When can the child brush his or her own teeth? Usually about the same time he or she can tie shoes. The manual dexterity required to tie shoes is also necessary to do a good job brushing. Parents should still be on hand to make sure it is done well. Flossing should start whenever the child has two teeth in close proximity to each other, usually when the molars (or back teeth) come in. If they are spaced apart from each other, flossing is usually not necessary until the permanent molars erupt.

We want our kids to be healthy, happy and pain free, don't we? So respect those baby teeth! They have great purpose, not the least of which is providing us with that toothy grin that every parent loves.