

DENTAL CARE

from

Vicki Lansky's Practical Parenting Tips

Diet is the first line of defense for good dental care; between-meal snacks and highly sugared foods contribute to decay. Frequent brushings remove the plaque that leads to decay. Brushing after snacks, even healthful ones like raisins or fruit juice, is particularly important. Toddlers and preschoolers, however enthusiastic, need help with toothbrushing; the manual dexterity necessary to thoroughly clean every surface of every tooth doesn't develop until the age of six or seven. To show where plaque collects on your child's teeth and where decay can start, put a drop of food coloring on a cotton swab, and rub it around the teeth and gums. The remaining stains will indicate where to clean.

Dentists recommend that your child's routine dental exams should begin when two or three teeth are in. Some parents take their children to their regular family dentists; others prefer pedodontists, who are specially trained to deal with the anxieties and emotions of youngsters. It is as important for a dentist to watch the shape of a child's mouth and to check the child's bite as it is to check for cavities.

Toothbrushing Routines

- ◆ Consider cleaning your infant's first tooth or two with a small gauze pad, with or without toothpaste. Rub the pad over the teeth and gums very gently to remove plaque and food debris. You'll probably find it easier to do this with the child's head on your lap.
- ◆ Lie a small child down (on a bed, on your knees) to have better access to those new little teeth.
- ◆ Let the child practice brushing in the tub, where he or she can splatter, drool, and gargle to heart's content.
- ◆ Let your child perform toothbrushing routines with you, both for the company and so you set an example. Some children are even allowed to brush their parents' teeth so they can improve their techniques.
- ◆ Hang a small mirror at the child's eye level so he or she can watch the action.

- ◆ Get little mouths to open wide for proper brushing by having them make noises as their teeth are being brushed: "Hee Hee" and "Haa Haa" will allow for plenty of room. A Tarzan yell is also effective.
- ◆ Shield your eyes from the "dazzling shine" of teeth well brushed!

Maximum Efficiency

- ◆ To get your child to brush longer and to understand the purpose of it, name every food the child has eaten that day, and brush it away. Or encourage your child to open his or her mouth when you help with toothbrushing by asking to "find" monsters, relatives, and cartoon characters deep in their mouth.
- ◆ See how many faces you both can make while brushing your teeth to prolong the process. Keep score while you both continue to brush.
- ◆ Try using an egg timer, with the rule that brushing continues until the sand is down. Or use a kitchen timer set for a specific length of time, or for a change, use a music box or a tape.

Helpful Aids

- ◆ Let children use an electric toothbrush if they like the vibration. The cordless kinds are the easiest to handle.
- ◆ Offer a selection of toothbrushes, in all colors, and one or more toothpastes that the child likes. The small samples or travel sizes are favorites. (You may find that mint flavored toothpastes are too strong for your child's sensitive taste buds.)
- ◆ Tape half of the hole in wall-mounted toothbrush holder, so kids' smaller brushes don't fall through.

