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Smile, Baby!



The alarming fact is that childhood dental decay is on the rise among Singaporean children. We quizzed the professionals at Thomson Dental Centre about what we as parents can do to look after our children's smiles and keep them smiling into adulthood.





Dr Yeo demonstrates correct brushing techniques

Q: At what age should a child first visit a dentist?

A: Bring your young child to see a dentist immediately after his first birthday. Dental care, however, should start when the first tooth appears, usually around 6 months old.

Q: How would you describe the typical experience of a child's first visit to the dentist?

A: The first visit should be an introductory visit to allow the child to experience the clinical environment with an element of fun, such as taking a 'space ride' on the dental chair. It will typically involve some dietary counselling and oral hygiene instructions on home care and brushing. If the child is relaxed and permits the dentist to look into his mouth, a quick checkup is done. However, if the child is nervous, just allow him to observe and 'soak' in the clinic's environment while the dentist gives advice on brushing and diet. Reinforce the positive experience by bringing him twice yearly visits to the dental clinic.

Q: How do your dentists put young children at ease?

A: The dentists at Thomson Dental Centre have years of experience in the treatment of young children, many of them being parents themselves. Ways to engage the child include riding up and down on the 'space chair' and transforming the dental lights, the chairside air jet and water jet into fun-filled toys. Shooting water at the accompanying parents becomes a game that sends the little ones squealing with delight. We also inject air into latex gloves and create balloon sculptures. If the child is well-behaved, he gets a small prize or sticker. This rapidly brings on a smile!

Q: What are the most common dental health problems faced by children, and their causes?

A: 40% of the young children in Singapore suffer from Early Childhood Caries or ECC, a severe form of dental decay that spreads rapidly causing much pain and discomfort to the child. This condition is often caused by early transmission of decay-causing bacteria from the mother or caregiver to the child by the sharing of food and utensils such as cups, spoons and straws. This is especially true if the mother or caregiver has untreated decay herself and passes on this bacteria by kissing their infants or sharing their food or food utensils. Lack of brushing at home, a late introduction to tooth-brushing, and a failure to brush children's teeth for them are also common causes. Drinking milk or sweetened fluids from the bottle, especially during the night, is a major cause. Night-time demand breast feeding, thumb-sucking and pacifier use all heighten the decay risk.



Dr Yeo delights a young patient with a balloon sculpture fashioned from a glove

Q: What are the consequences of neglecting dental problems in children?

A: ECC may result in rampant decay affecting the young child's teeth, leading to needless pain, discomfort and inability to eat or sleep well. A child's self-esteem may also suffer if the teeth are visibly affected. Prolonged use of the pacifier and thumb-sucking at night can affect the shape of the developing jaw arch, resulting in a condition called anterior open bite which may require orthodontic correction later on.

Q: Does heredity play a part in children's dental health?

A: The protective qualities of the saliva that may affect susceptibility to caries or decay, crooked teeth and malalignments of the jaw can be genetically inherited. However, 'bad' teeth are usually the product of 'bad habits'.

Q: Do you have any advice for anxious parents bringing their children to the dentist?

A: Parents that have dental phobias should not discuss them in front of their kids, or they risk 'passing on' their fears to the next generation. Do not demonise the dentist by making threats to the child like, "If you do not sit still, I will ask the dentist to poke you with a long needle!". Also, assign the more confident parent to accompany the child for his or her first visit.

Q: How can a parent mentally and emotionally prepare his or her child for a trip to the dentist?

A: Read a book about visiting the dentist, and work on free downloadable Colouring Pages about visits to the dentist. Schedule the appointment when your child is not cranky or sleepy and, above all, remain calm yourself. Keep the visit short and sweet – 15 to 30 minutes is usually enough. Maintain regular twice-yearly visits thereafter to reinforce the positive experience.

Q: Do you have any tips for parents on promoting good oral health in children?

A: We promote a 3-pronged approach to reduce the risk of tooth decay.

1. Diet Supervision

Limit drinks and snacks that contain sugar. Avoid sipping and snacking throughout the day or 'grazing', and offer food only at fixed mealtimes, whenever possible. If your child has to take sugary food and drinks, serve them only with meals. If your child gets hungry between meals, have on hand a variety of nutritious and balanced snack options that are low in sugar. Encourage the drinking of water to wash away sugars.

2. Good Oral Hygiene Habits

Wipe the gum arch after feeding with a clean, wet gauze or towel wrapped over a finger. When the baby teeth first erupt, brush them gently twice a day with a baby-sized toothbrush. Toothpastes with fluorides are not recommended until the age of two or when the child is able to spit. Brush your child's teeth for him twice daily until the age of six, but allow him to try brushing with the toothbrush. Thereafter, let your child brush with an adult's supervision until the age of nine. Avoid sharing food or chewing the food meant for infants and toddlers. Wean your child off the milk bottle by the age of one, and encourage him to drink from a cup by his first birthday.

3. Early Dental Checkups

Schedule the first dental checkup by the child's first birthday.

By spending a few minutes each day to care for your child's teeth and visiting the dentist early, you can help ensure that your child's smile gets off to a healthy start with good dental habits that carry into adulthood.

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