Use this guide to learn about oral health and taking care of your child’s teeth from birth to kindergarten and into their teen years.

Disclaimer: Delta Dental of Minnesota provides oral health information to improve the dental health of our community. We believe they will make better oral health choices with this education. This guide is not intended to be used for the diagnosis or treatment of a dental or health condition and should not be used as a substitute for seeking dental or health care on a regular basis or when conditions warrant.
WELCOME TO TOOTH TIME
- PART OF THE SMILE SERIES -

Did you know that how well you care for your child’s teeth will affect his or her ability to learn and grow up healthy? By spending a few minutes each day to care for your child’s baby teeth, you can be certain your child’s smile will get off to a healthy start for a lifetime! Practicing good oral health care in your family will help protect your child’s teeth, improve their overall health, and maintain their bright smile.
Birth – 18 months

Learn about:
- Care of your infant’s mouth and gums
- “Teething” babies
- Baby’s first teeth
- Tooth decay
- Dental visits
- Pacifiers
- Bottles
- Sugary drinks and foods

18 months to 3 years

Learn about:
- Good eating habits
- Sugary drinks and foods
- Brushing teeth
- Pacifiers
- Bottles and sippy cups

3 to 5 years

Learn about:
- Protecting your child’s teeth when they are at school or a program away from home
- Pacifiers and thumb sucking
- Parent checklist
- Brushing teeth
- Sugary drinks and foods

5 to 18 years

Learn about:
- Role modeling
- Dental visits
- Teeth that come out
- Brushing teeth
- Flossing teeth
- Sugary drinks and foods
Some Germs Cause Cavities

Germs can form easily in a baby’s mouth (even before the first teeth come in). Some germs cause tooth decay, so it is important to take care of your baby’s mouth even before they get their first teeth.

Early childhood cavities, also called baby bottle tooth decay or nursing mouth, can destroy your child’s teeth and become a serious mouth infection that can be life-threatening if left untreated. You should also know that this infection can be prevented.

Parents, your oral health is also important to your child’s teeth. Germs in your mouth can cause cavities and can be passed along while feeding and caring for your child. If you take care of your mouth, keep it clean and get your dental work done, you don’t pass as many cavity-causing germs along to your child. If you have cavities that are not filled, you have germs that can be passed on to your child through behaviors such as kissing and sharing eating utensils.

- Start cleaning your baby’s mouth a few days after birth.
- Wipe your baby’s gums with a clean damp washcloth after every feeding.
- Avoid sharing spoons and “cleaning” your child’s pacifier with your mouth.
- Do not pre-chew your child’s food before feeding it to your child.
- Brush your teeth daily and see the dentist regularly to maintain your oral health.
As early as six months, your baby may experience sore or tender gums as teeth erupt. Gently rub your baby’s gums with a clean finger, a small cool spoon, or a wet gauze pad. Give your baby a clean teething ring to chew on.

Caring for Your Baby’s First Teeth

- The front teeth usually come in first. They may start coming in about six months after birth. Most children have 20 baby (“primary”) teeth by age three.

- Brush your child’s teeth (even if it’s only one tooth!) with a soft toothbrush two times a day.

- Use a gentle, short, back-and-forth brushing motion.

- Brush for about 2 minutes using a tiny amount or “smear” of fluoride toothpaste. Make a dental appointment by your child’s first birthday.

- Baby teeth are important, even though they fall out, because they help your child chew food, talk clearly and hold spaces for permanent teeth.

- Have a plan to have your baby give up his or her pacifier by age 2.
TOOTH + SUGARY FOOD + GERMS = TOOTH DECAY
PREVENTING TOOTH DECAY

Germs that cause tooth decay are often transferred between parents/caregivers, other children and your baby by sharing or cleaning pacifiers, bottles/sippy cups and eating utensils.

Once the germs are present in your child’s mouth, tooth decay begins when the germs are mixed with sugary foods and drinks. Sweetened liquids contain sugar, which will pool around your child’s teeth during sleep. If sugar mixes with germs for a long period of time, it will form an acid that eats holes in your child’s teeth.

- Do not allow your child to fall asleep with a bottle containing breast milk, formula, fruit juices or other sugary liquids.
- To soothe your child at bedtime, try soft music.
- Do not dip a pacifier in sweetened foods (sugar, honey or syrup) and let your child suck on it.
- When you begin offering your child foods other than formula or breast milk, limit how often you serve sugary drinks and foods.
- Avoid letting older children share bottles, sippy cups, and eating utensils.
- If your child uses a sippy cup, don’t allow them to use it all day, especially if it has juice or other sugary liquids in it. Encourage using a cup at meal times after age 1.
- Once cavities start, they can get worse quickly.
Your child should visit a dentist by the time he or she reaches one year of age. The dentist can provide any necessary treatment and information on keeping his or her mouth healthy and disease-free.

- Prepare your child to visit the dentist by playing a game of “dentist” or reading books about going to the dentist.

- Tell your child about what will happen at a dental visit. Avoid saying things like, “It won’t hurt” or “Don’t be scared.”

- Consider bringing your child along when an older sibling visits the dentist, and talk to him or her about the experience.

- Ask your dentist if your child needs fluoride varnish or other forms of fluoride.

Happy 1st Birthday! Your dental check-up is due.
Parents and caregivers should take an active role in the health of their child’s teeth by encouraging a healthy diet, and monitoring daily brushing with fluoride toothpaste. Another important habit is regularly looking at your child’s teeth each month. It’s called “lift the lip.” This check should not replace your child’s regular dental visits.

“Lifting the lip,” parents can look for signs of undetected tooth decay or other potential tooth problems:

- Changes in tooth color (white lines or brown spots)
- Holes on the tooth surface
- Broken or chipped teeth
- Swollen or bleeding gums

Changes in your child’s mouth should be reported to the dentist. By establishing regular oral health habits early in life, you can improve the oral health of your children one tooth at a time.
WEANING YOUR CHILD FROM THE PACIFIER

Using pacifiers or encouraging thumb sucking can affect the placement of your child’s permanent (adult) teeth.

Have a plan for helping your child give up thumb sucking or the pacifier.
It’s important to establish good eating habits when your child is young.

For meals and snacks, choose foods from the five main food groups: fruits, vegetables, meat, grain products, and dairy products. Plan to serve non-sugary snacks as part of the daily food plan.

Limit sugary foods to once or twice per day. It’s not how much sugar your child eats but how often that matters. If you decide to serve sugary foods and drinks, do so at regularly scheduled mealtimes and not as snacks between meals.

Encourage your child to drink lots of water in a cup in between meals. Water does not contain sugar, and it will satisfy thirst.

Be a role model for your child – ask your family to be role models too.

**Healthy Snacks**
- Vegetables
- Yogurt
- Fruits
- Cheese
- Peanut butter
- Cottage cheese
- Milk
- Unsweetened dry cereal
- Rice cakes

**Sugary and Salty Snacks (limit intake)**
- Chocolate
- Cookies and cake
- Ice cream
- Candy
- Fruit snacks or fruit chews
- Potato chips
- Crackers

**Sugary Drinks (limit intake)**
- Soda or pop (even diet*)
- Fruit juices and drinks
- Lemonade or iced tea
- Sports drinks and energy drinks
- Powdered drink mixes*

*Diet soda (pop) and some powdered drink mixes do not contain sugar but do contain certain acids that can damage the teeth.
Brushing your child’s teeth with fluoride toothpaste will prevent tooth decay. Fluoride is a substance in toothpaste that can strengthen the outer layer of a tooth, called the enamel.

- Brush your child’s teeth twice per day, especially before going to bed at night.
- Use a child-sized toothbrush with soft bristles.
- Brush your child’s teeth with a tiny “pea-sized” amount of fluoride toothpaste on the brush.
- Teach your child to spit out the toothpaste. Do not rinse after brushing.
- Be a role model for your child by brushing your teeth.
Prepare for teaching your child to brush by choosing a child-sized toothbrush with soft bristles. Consider choosing a bright-colored toothbrush with a pattern to encourage brushing. Flavored toothpaste also encourages brushing.

- Help your child learn to brush using a gentle, short, back-and-forth motion.

- Encourage your child with positive feedback such as “What a good tooth-brusher you are!” or “You have such a healthy smile!”

- You will have to help your child “finish up” until he or she is older and can do a good job on their own. Children who can tie their shoes may be ready to brush on their own.

- Be sure to brush every tooth on all surfaces (top side, front side, back side).

- Be a role model by brushing your own teeth at the same time as your child.
Protecting Your Child’s Teeth When They Are at Child Care or School

Your child’s teeth are important for eating and talking. If your child’s teeth hurt, he or she may not be able to pay attention in school. You can help protect your child’s teeth when they are away from home by asking some important questions.

1. If your child attends programs like Head Start or other child care and education programs, find out if the program encourages brushing. Ask: Do you brush my child’s teeth during the day or help him or her to brush?

2. Find out what meals and snacks caregivers provide to your child during the day. Make sure your child is offered healthy foods when away from home. Ask: What does my child eat during the day?

3. Whether traveling in a car or bus, your child should always sit in a child safety seat the right size for his or her age. Without this, your child may hurt his or her face, mouth, or teeth. Ask: When traveling in a car or bus, is my child in a safety seat that is the right size for his or her age?
Use this checklist to make sure you’re doing everything you can to protect your preschooler’s bright smile.

Do you ....

_____ Replace your child’s toothbrush every 3-4 months and after an illness like a cold or the flu?

_____ Make sure your child brushes twice per day, especially before bedtime?

_____ Use a small (pea-sized) amount of fluoride toothpaste on your preschooler’s brush?

_____ Have your child spit out toothpaste instead of swallowing it? Make sure your child does not rinse after brushing?

_____ Make sure your child visits the dentist once per year or as often as recommended by the dentist?

_____ Ask your dentist questions you have about caring for your child’s teeth?

_____ Call your dentist if one of your child’s baby teeth is accidentally knocked out?

_____ Make sure your child eats no more than 1-2 sugary snacks per day?

_____ Have a plan for helping your child give up thumb sucking?
As a parent, you are the most important role model for your child, so consider making dental health care a family practice at your house.

- Encourage your child to drink milk, water, and some juice instead of soda or sweetened beverages.

- Remember, it’s how often your child eats sugary drinks and foods that may lead to cavities.

- Have your child brush his or her teeth twice per day and after sugary snacks.

- Encourage your child to brush for two minutes each time he or she brushes.

- Help your child brush, or check their teeth after brushing, until he or she does a good job on their own.

- Have your child floss twice per week. Begin flossing when the teeth touch.

- Take your child to the dentist once per year or as often as the dentist recommends.

- Ask your dentist any questions you may have about your child’s teeth and oral hygiene.

- Teach your child about how tooth decay develops (certain germs mix with sugar from drinks and foods and create an acid that damages the teeth).
By age four or five your child’s dentist may have given your child a fluoride treatment to strengthen his or her teeth. The dentist will continue to take x-rays of your child’s teeth and may give your child fluoride treatments during his or her school years.

- Make sure your child visits the dentist each year or as often as the dentist recommends.

- Follow the dentist’s instructions.

- Make sure to ask your dentist any questions you have about your child’s teeth and oral health care.

  **Taking Care of a Tooth that Accidentally Comes Out**

  As you know, children play hard! If by accident one of your child’s permanent (not baby) teeth is knocked out, follow these steps.

  - Put the tooth back in its socket; or
  - Put it in milk or salt water; or
  - Hold it in your mouth until you can put it in milk or water.
  - See your dentist right away! (Baby teeth should not be replaced. If your child’s baby tooth is knocked out, save it and call your dentist.)