

The Whole Tooth

Your adult child will thank you for looking after their teeth in their pre-school years

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Do you know that tooth decay is the most common chronic disease of childhood, especially for children under five years of age, and can be completely avoided?

What is tooth decay?

Tooth decay happens when sugar in a child's mouth is turned into acid by bacteria in the dental plaque. This acid can damage the tooth enamel, causing a hole or cavity. Plaque is a colourless, sticky film that builds up on the teeth every day and is removed by brushing

properly. Healthy habits established in your child's pre-school and early school years (age 4 to 11) can help protect your child's teeth for life. Children with untreated tooth decay may have a lot of pain, which can affect their ability to learn at school.

What causes tooth decay?

A diet high in sugar increases the risk of tooth decay, free sugars are the main cause. These are sugars that are added to food and drink by food manufacturers or by the person consuming the food or drink, including sucrose (white

sugar) glucose or fructose. It is also sugar already in honey and 100% fruit juice. Sugary and fizzy drinks are one of the main culprits for tooth decay due to their high sugar content. Drinking just one can of soft drink a day can also cause weight gain. The best drinks for the teeth are water and milk. Tap water containing fluoride can help prevent decay as the fluoride acts as a repair kit for teeth by helping to strengthen them.

Hard, sticky, chewy sweets, or lollipops, stick to the teeth and the sugar stays in the mouth for longer. Too many of these



can lead to cavities and tooth decay. Sour sweets have high levels of acid which weaken the tooth enamel making it more likely to get tooth decay.

Can my child have treats?

The Dental Health Foundation advises that it is best to have treats at mealtime and to rinse the mouth with water afterward to wash away the sugar. This is because each 'acid attack' can last up to 20 minutes after a sugary snack has been finished. Giving your child just one sweet a couple of times during the day between meals increases the risk of decay. This is because the more times you have sugar the greater the risk. The Foundation has a new online video on its website where you can learn about sugar and oral health.

It's not just processed foods that are high in sugar, natural foods like raisins and 100% fruit juice are high in sugar too. There is no such thing as natural sugar being less harmful to the teeth. Sugar is sugar. Giving your child healthy snacks between meals like whole pieces of fruit, natural unsweetened yoghurt, crackers and low-fat cheddar cheese will help to form good habits from a young age.

Creating a good oral hygiene routine

Life can get busy, especially with the kids back in school and lots of activities or play dates being organised for the weekends. Family routines are important as everyone feels more organised, less stressed, and will have more time for fun events! Routine also helps your child to develop important life skills and build healthy habits.

Sometimes it can be a bit tricky for parents to find time for things like oral

hygiene. However, if you help your child establish good eating and toothbrushing habits hopefully you won't have the battle of trying to break bad habits later!

Oral hygiene and toothbrushing is an important part of self-care, just like teaching your child to wash their hands after using the toilet. It can also help with bedtime routines by allowing your child to know when it's time to get ready for sleep time! It will also help with the daily routine of getting ready in the morning to go to school.

Why not create a positive daily routine with your child by including some of our suggestions:

- Brushing the teeth twice a day.
- Drinking lots of water.
- Reducing their intake of sugary foods and drinks.

Tips for encouraging children

You can also make toothbrushing a game using our free brushing chart from our website, which will help you with the correct tooth-brushing technique. It could also be part of a daily relaxing mindfulness exercise, whatever suits you and your child best.

- Let your child feel the sensation of the bristles on their gums and teeth and notice how fresh their mouth feels when brushing is finished.
- Teach them to focus on their breathing.
- Play their favourite tune while brushing their teeth.

So what is a good routine?

It's important that your child brushes their teeth twice a day to help prevent tooth decay – at night before bed and in the morning for two to three minutes. This will help to remove plaque from the teeth. Use a pea-sized amount of fluoride

toothpaste from the age of two with at least 1000 parts per million fluoride. Young children will need you to brush their teeth correctly and to supervise them to avoid swallowing toothpaste, until about seven years of age. Help and show them how to spit it out after brushing, don't rinse with water as this only washes the protective fluoride off the teeth. Fluoride helps keep their teeth strong and mouth healthy.

Let your child choose their own toothbrush to make things more exciting for them, and replace it about every three months, or sooner if the bristles are worn. A worn toothbrush won't do a good job of cleaning the teeth.

From the age of eight children should floss daily to remove particles of food that may have become trapped and can cause gum inflammation, tooth decay, and bad breath. Other things to consider are wearing a mouth guard when playing sports to reduce the risk of dental injury.

Mid-term breaks are a great opportunity to bring kids to the dentist for their annual check-up. It is recommended that they have their first dental visit by their first birthday so that they get used to the experience and to encourage good tooth brushing and oral hygiene habits.

Finally, don't forget that you can set a good example. Be a role model by brushing your own teeth twice a day, flossing, and limiting your sugar intake.

For lots more oral health tips for a healthy mouth see www.dentalhealth.ie



Etain Kett is Public Affairs and Communications Manager with the Dental Health Foundation, a charitable trust which is passionate about oral health promotion. We empower people to make a positive difference in their own oral health. Etain is a member of the Public Relations Institute of Ireland.