



*A Parent's Guide to  
Oral Health for Kids and Teens*

Helping your child develop strong oral hygiene habits can be a challenge at times, but the benefits of keeping the teeth strong and healthy through childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood cannot be denied. Cavities can be filled, but a tooth with a filling will always be structurally compromised when compared to an untouched tooth. All restorations wear out over time and a mouth full of fillings as a teenager often equals a future of larger and more expensive restorations as an adult.

Combined with proper guidance on nutrition and exercise, teaching your child good oral hygiene habits may be some of the best health-promoting education you can offer them. But don't wait until your child's first visit to the dentist to start developing these habits. Teeth should be cared for from the moment they start erupting, and there is a great deal you can do even before that first tooth erupts to help your child get used to the routine of caring for the mouth.

### *Infants & Toddlers*

Even though most children will eventually lose all their baby teeth, the health of these teeth is vitally important to the proper spacing and development of the adult teeth, as well as the fostering of good nutritional habits overall.

Bottle mouth, or baby bottle tooth decay, is common in toddlers who experience frequent and prolonged exposure to beverages that contain sugar. Breast milk and formula both contain different forms of sugar that can contribute to bottle mouth, but the worst culprits are usually juice and soft drinks. However, there is some evidence that babies will often fall asleep with

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## ***Infants & Toddlers (cont.)***

some milk still in their mouths. If there is plaque on the teeth, decalcification can start even at this age. And decalcification is a precursor to cavities.

Cavity causing bacteria can also be passed from parent to child through the saliva. When a parent puts a baby's feeding spoon or pacifier in their own mouth to clean it or demonstrate its use, the bacteria can then be passed onto the baby. Here are the best ways to avoid baby bottle tooth decay, and to start your child on the right path to more advanced oral hygiene techniques as the teeth begin to erupt:

### **Birth to Age 2:**

#### ***1. Avoid sharing saliva.***

Don't share a feeding spoon or lick your child's pacifier to clean it.

#### ***2. Do not flavor pacifiers.***

If your child uses a pacifier, always provide a clean one and do not dip it in sugar, honey or any other flavoring.

#### ***3. Only use water, formula, milk, or breast milk in bottles.***

Never fill the bottle with sugar water, juice, soft drinks or other sweet beverages. Do not put diet beverages in the bottles either. The acid content in most diet beverages can also damage the teeth over time, and many contain excessive amounts of caffeine which can be very dangerous for young children.



### **Birth to Age 2 (cont.):**

4. *Finish feedings before placing your child in bed.*

Do not allow your child to continue to use a bottle full of milk, formula, or breast milk during bedtime or naptime. If you do allow your child to have a bottle with them during naps or at night, it should contain only water.

5. *After each feeding, wipe your child's gums with a clean, damp gauze or washcloth.*

Start this habit as early as possible to control bacterial growth and to help your child adjust to regular oral hygiene.

6. *Ease the transition from teething ring to toothbrush.*

Purchase a teething ring/infant toothbrush set that has a similar shape and size.

7. *Brush new baby teeth gently with plain water.*

The best position is to lay the baby on your lap with their head at your knees. Try to make it a game with singing and talking. If your child is under the age of 2, do not use any toothpaste without consulting with your dentist or physician first.

### **Ages 2 to 7:**

1. *Use a soft-bristled, child-sized toothbrush with a pea-sized amount of toothpaste.*

A firm toothbrush will not clean the teeth better and can damage the gums when used aggressively. Large adult-sized bristle heads will not fit correctly into small mouths, and excessive toothpaste will increase the likelihood of your child swallowing some every time they brush.



### **Ages 2 to 7 (cont.):**

2. *Allow your child to brush as best they can at first, and then finish the brushing for them.*

Still keep it a game. Make sure you are reaching the cheek and lip sides as well as the tongue sides of the teeth. Use the time to instruct your child on the areas he or she may be missing.

3. *Children should brush at least twice a day.*

Be sure to supervise every toothbrushing session until your child can be counted on to spit out the toothpaste and not swallow it. This is usually until the age of 6 or 7. Children with developmental disabilities may require supervision for a longer period of time.

4. *Floss your children's teeth for them at least once a day.*

Do this for them until their finger dexterity develops enough that they can write legibly. However, with the advent of computers, writing legibly for some has become a thing of the past. You may have to use your own judgement. If you have trouble flossing yourself, get some pointers from your dental office. You need to learn to do it gently. If it causes the child pain when the floss snaps down, it will be a battle.

## ***Kids & Teens***

The transition to unsupervised oral hygiene is always a little tricky. Kids who are already used to a daily regimen of caring for their teeth with their parents tend to do better, but any child can experience a period of resistance to personal hygiene, especially during adolescence. Here are a few tips and tools that may help:

1. *Use a timer.*

Kids and teens tend to rush through brushing in order to get on to a less boring activity. Put a kitchen timer or a sand timer in the area where your children brush their teeth. The timer

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## ***Kids & Teens (cont.)***

should run for at least 2 minutes. This is the minimum amount of time that should be spent on brushing for both children and adults. Many power toothbrushes will also have timers built in.

### ***2. Provide floss aids.***

Pre-threaded flossers are not as effective as traditional floss is in wrapping around each tooth and breaking up plaque colonies, but they are certainly better than not flossing at all. Many kids and teens struggle with the finger dexterity required for traditional flossing, and will give up altogether. Help them keep the habit going with these transitional tools.

### ***3. Talk frankly with your kids about the value of personal hygiene.***

Cavities, plaque build-up, food particles stuck in the teeth, and bad breath can all have a negative impact on personal relationships and first impressions. Also, fillings and dental treatment are expensive. I told my own children that if they got cavities in between their teeth they would have to pay for them because those cavities are almost 100% preventable.

### ***4. Stay on top of your child's diet.***

You can't always know every single thing your child is eating and drinking – especially as they become teenagers. But you can control what is readily available for them to eat and drink at home. Soda, juice, sports & energy drinks, dried fruit, sweets, and highly refined carbohydrates should be limited or eliminated as regular parts of your child's diet.

### ***5. Model good oral hygiene for your children.***

Kids are savvy. If you ask them to floss and they see you don't do it yourself, the message will lose its impact. Besides, maintaining good oral hygiene yourself will not only help your kids, it will also help you.

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## ***It's Never Too Late***

Starting your kids on the right path to good oral hygiene as early as possible is the best way to help them keep their teeth healthy for a lifetime. But it is never too late to start. No matter how old your children are – even if they have several fillings and cavities already – you can still help them improve their oral health and prevent future damage by establishing these habits now and consulting with your dentist about additional tools or products that might be specifically helpful to your child.

### **References:**

American Dental Association:

*Baby Bottle Tooth Decay*

*Healthy Habits: Babies and Kids*

*Healthy Habits: Preteens and Teens*

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