

Healthy teeth in child care

Helping children develop good oral health practices from a very early age is important for at least two reasons: firstly, good oral health makes a contribution to general wellbeing in children; and secondly, early childhood dental hygiene is a key factor in the development of healthy adult teeth.

Fifteen per cent of infants in Australia suffer dental decay. Although dental health in children has improved in the last decade, 50 per cent of children aged 6 years still have caries. Dental decay in preschool children is linked with late starting of tooth brushing, low frequency of tooth brushing, frequent snacking, prolonged use of the feeding bottle, use of the dummy dipped in sweet substances, high/frequent sugar consumption and parents' attitudes.

Guidelines for oral hygiene and prevention of caries

- Avoid the use of nursing bottles containing sweetened milk, food as a reward for good behaviour, pacifiers dipped in sweet substances (eg. honey, jam), nursing bottles as pacifiers or bottles containing anything other than water to help a child fall asleep.
- Offer water to drink in preference to carbonated drinks, cordial, flavoured milk and fruit juices.
- Limit the number of times snacks are offered each day. Offer snacks that are nutritious: vegetables, cheese, yoghurt, fruit, plain pasta, and bread with spreads such as meat, cheese and vegetable extracts.
- Encourage children who are old enough to rinse their mouth with water after each meal.

Starting tooth brushing

- Gently clean baby's gums and teeth with a clean damp face cloth or cotton gauze to remove plaque and milk.
- Introduce tooth brushing at around age 2. To brush teeth, a child needs to be able to hold a toothbrush and to spit and rinse rather than swallowing the toothpaste or mouth rinse.
- Use a soft, small children's toothbrush and low fluoride toothpaste (half the concentration of adult fluoride toothpaste) and ensure the child only uses a pea-sized amount of toothpaste each time.
- Supervise tooth brushing, or brush for the child until he or she is able to manage alone.
- Avoid using antiseptic mouthwashes unless prescribed by a doctor or dentist for a dental or oral condition, as they are potentially harmful.
- Keep in mind that young children should only brush their teeth twice a day.
- When your child is in care outside the home, find out about policies and practices in relation to oral hygiene and ask for information about how you can support good oral hygiene at home.

Good oral health practices are not difficult to achieve and patterns for life can start early in life which will provide a valuable and ongoing benefit to the children.

References:

Australian Dental Association Website (www.ada.org.au)

Ismail A. I. (1998) Prevention of Early Childhood Caries.

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(www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au)

Carmel Betros

Statewide Co-ordinator

NSW Health Children's Services



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