



Joan E. LeFebvre  
Family Living Agent

# Parenting the Preschooler

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/pp/>

## Dental Habits Start Early

Good dental habits are essential for maintaining good dental health. Establishing good dental habits when your children are very young can lead to a lifetime of trouble free dental health.

Let your preschooler brush their own teeth with a soft child size brush. But, until they start first grade, you should brush them too. Make it fun and lighthearted. Brush 5 seconds at a time, counting out loud so the child knows when a break is coming so they can spit or close and swallow.

Little ones are not too good at rinsing so use only a very small amount of toothpaste. Use a pea-sized portion of fluoridated toothpaste. Too much toothpaste could cause them to swallow too much fluoride which is not good for their developing teeth. Change your child's toothbrush when it looks shaggy and old.

The most important time of day to brush is right before going to bed. In the morning, after breakfast is another good time to brush.

Baby teeth are important for speaking and chewing but they are also necessary to maintain space for the permanent teeth and help guide them into position. If you ever see anything you think might be a cavity, take your child to the dentist right away. Decay can progress very rapidly in small children.

### Prevention

Take your child to the dentist for their first visit long before there are any problems. The dentist can then have the opportunity to gradually work your child into the checkup and cleaning routine. The dentist will be able to make recommendations about fluoride.

Fluoride and sealants are very important tools of prevention. Together they can reduce decay up to 90%.

Dentists recommend that children begin routine dental visits by age one so that any problems may be detected, treated early, or even avoided completely.

Your child's first visit to the dentist can be a pleasant adventure. Talk about the visit in a positive matter-of-fact way, as you would any important new experience. Explain that the dentist is a friendly doctor who will help your child stay healthy.

During the first visit, the child's mouth will be examined for tooth decay and other problems. The teeth may be cleaned by the dentist or dental hygienist. The dentist will explain how the child's teeth should be cleaned at home, how diet and eating habits affect dental health, and methods to ensure that your child gets sufficient fluoride.

### Decay Prevention Using Sealants

A sealant is a clear or shaded plastic material that your dentist may apply to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth. Because the back teeth have depressions and grooves on their chewing surfaces, they are difficult or impossible to clean. The sealant forms a coating that protects the tooth from bacteria and bits of food. By protecting the depressions and grooves with a coating of sealant, your dentist can greatly reduce your child's risk of tooth decay.

## Importance of Primary Teeth

Most children have a full set of 20 primary teeth by the time they are three years old. It is very important that primary teeth are kept until they are lost naturally. Important functions of primary teeth are:

- ▶ Help maintain good nutrition by permitting your child to chew properly.
- ▶ Allow good pronunciation and speech habits.
- ▶ Boost your child's self-esteem about the way they look.
- ▶ Assist toward the proper eruption of the permanent teeth.

When primary teeth are lost too early, the space that is left should be maintained by a "space maintainer" to ensure that there will be enough room for the permanent teeth when they erupt. Your dentist has the knowledge required to apply both preventive and corrective techniques that will maintain the health of your child's teeth. Many times the dentist can make a minor correction that will eliminate major dental work later.

## Dental Injuries

Falls at home or on the playground and athletic injuries often cause damage to the teeth and gums. Many injuries are obvious but some can be hidden. It is important to have your dentist examine the child as soon as possible after the incident even if the wounds don't look too bad. You should go to the dentist as soon as possible after the injury so that no teeth are lost from hidden injuries beneath the gums. Prompt treatment often can help stop later bite problems. Quick action often can save a tooth that has been knocked completely out of the socket.

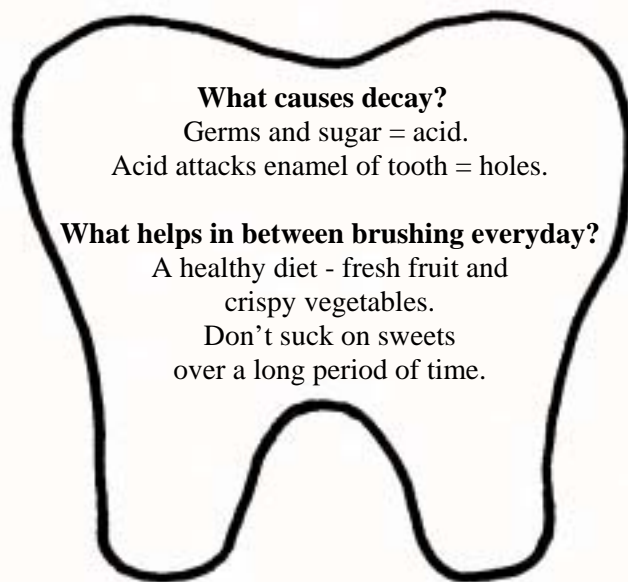
What to do if a tooth is knocked out? Don't rinse it. Place in milk or plastic bag. Visit dentist as soon as you can.

Consider having your child wear a sports guard when playing physical sports.

## Management of Bite Problems

Bite problems (teeth are in the wrong positions) are often a concern to parents. Some of these problems are hereditary, such as missing or extra teeth from birth, but many are caused by other factors like thumb sucking or early loss of baby teeth. It is important to detect bite problems and determine their cause as soon as possible. Treatment may also improve your child's appearance, speech, and ability to eat and digest foods properly.

The preschool years are an important time to help your child form good eating habits. At this age, many children need to eat snacks because they cannot always eat enough food at mealtimes to get all the nutrients and energy they need. Help your child choose sensible snacks--foods that don't promote tooth decay.



Many holidays feature candy. Consider making your family's holiday food traditions ones that include healthier food choices. And be sure to brush teeth after eating candy.

*Sources:*

"Dentistry for Kids." Parent and Preschooler, March 1998.

"Good Dental Habits Start Early." <http://members.aol.com/gentledent/habits.htm>. February, 1996.

"The Pediatric Dentist." American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. <http://aapd.org/PedDent.htm>. 1997.

Your Child's Teeth. American Dental Association. 1992.