

Losing baby teeth is a rite of passage

By Lana Berkowitz

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Spoiler alert: If you or your child is eagerly awaiting a visit from the [Tooth Fairy](#), stop reading now. You may learn something about that tooth hoarder that you do not want to know.

In many cultures when a child loses a baby tooth, a little mouse replaces a tooth left under the youngster's pillow with a small gift.

The toothless in several countries prefer to throw the baby teeth in the ocean or a field, at the sun or on the roof. In some Asian countries, baby teeth are thrown on the roof or under the house depending on whether they want the incoming tooth to grow up or down.

Around the world, the loss of a baby tooth is a rite of passage marked by different traditions.

In the U.S., we have the Tooth Fairy, a fantastical nocturnal creature who slips into a sleeping child's room to take a baby tooth left under the pillow and leave a gift of money.

The Tooth Fairy tradition takes some of the edge off the loss of that first tooth, said psychology professor [Jacqueline D. Woolley](#), director of UT's Children's [Research Lab](#) at the [University of Texas at Austin](#). "I think it's partly just trying to put a positive spin on what could be a scary event for kids."

And the Tooth Fairy's gift of money for the gap-toothed kid symbolizes a growing-up milestone.

"So you are losing a tooth, but you are kind of becoming a part of the adult world. I think money, at least in our culture, symbolizes that," said Woolley.

Plus, it's a fun tradition for kids and parents, who remember the Tooth Fairy experiences with their parents or associate the story with a happy childhood, she said.

Adults promote fantasy figures because they feel that childhood is this magical stage where anything is possible, and the longer we prolong that the better because real life is hard, Woolley said. Yet the Tooth Fairy's enchanted stack of coins is not immune from economic realities. A 2011 [Visa](#) Inc. survey shows that kids get an average of \$2.60 per tooth, a decrease from the previous year's \$3 per tooth.

American [Academy of Pediatric Dentistry](#) president Dr. Rhea Haugseth said dentists get more questions from parents than children about the Tooth Fairy. And pediatric dentists are not going to disabuse the notion of one of their best ambassadors. Haugseth has scripted answers for questions about the Tooth Fairy, who takes all her tooth loot to her magic castle, according to Haugseth.

Woolley thinks the Tooth Fairy experience is harmless. "And at the same time, I don't think it is necessary. It's just a part of our culture that kids expect because of their exposure to peers."

Some worry if children stop believing in high-profile fantasy creatures that the kids will be sad or angry with their parents and never trust the adults again.

"I actually think the whole process of figuring out that these beings aren't real is a real important discovery and can be a positive experience for kids," said Woolley, the mother of two teenagers.

Kids pick up on clues, even the ones parents don't mean to leave. Children notice others get different amounts of money or gifts in exchange for their discarded teeth. Older kids trade stories with their friends.

"They are figuring stuff out. They are being little scientists," Woolley said.

When Woolley's daughter began to have doubts, the little girl set up an experiment.

"She lost a tooth and didn't tell us. And then she put it under her pillow and, of course, in the morning, it was still there," Woolley said.

"She felt like she had figured it out on her own. That was empowering," Woolley said.

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