

1. First of all, thank you so much for talking to Untrained Housewife readers. Let us begin by discussing the need for dental health for kids, especially toddlers. Toddlers only have milk teeth that are going to fall off in any case, so why spend too much time brushing them?

Proper oral health is essential for infants as baby teeth are vulnerable to tooth decay as soon as they appear (usually between the ages of six and 12 months). Baby teeth (milk teeth) are important because they: hold space for permanent teeth, enable normal chewing, and allow for normal speech development. Children and toddlers with healthy mouths chew more easily and gain more nutrients from the foods they eat, which helps in the formation of the permanent teeth that are growing under the gums. Even more importantly, when parents take an active role in taking care of their child's oral health, the child has a lower risk of dental disease! Preventing the formation of cavities is much easier than treating the cavity once it forms.

2. How can parents choose the right pediatric toothbrushes and toothpastes for their toddlers?

Parents can find toothbrushes and toothpastes made especially for toddlers at local drug stores or "big box" retailers. Any soft toothbrush is acceptable – choose one your child likes and is more apt to use. Manual toothbrushes are easier at this age than the mechanical ones.

For infants, parents should use a soft toothbrush or cloth with water to clean babies' mouths and gums, especially after feeding.

Once baby teeth appear, parents should purchase the appropriately sized toothbrush for their child. Toothbrushes are available for all age groups in various shapes, sizes and colors. Make sure the brush you select has soft nylon bristles and is small enough to maneuver inside your child's mouth.

Before age two, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recommends brushing with an age-appropriate toothbrush at least twice a day using a "thin smear" of fluoridated toothpaste. For two-to-five year olds, use a "pea-size" amount of fluoridated toothpaste.

Remember, parents should always perform or assist children in tooth brushing until the child is around eight-years-old. Parents need to perform the flossing for their child until approximately eight-ten years of age.

3. What is the ideal age for a child to visit a dentist? Are there special kids' dentists or can he go to a regular dentist?

The AAPD, American Dental Association (ADA) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) all recommend a dental visit for children by **age one** or as soon as the first tooth appears, enabling the child to begin a lifelong preventive oral health care program and minimize tooth decay and cavities.

Pediatric dentists are specifically trained for children's unique dental health needs. Their specialized practice includes treating infants, children, adolescents and those with special health care needs. The professional education of pediatric dentists includes two-to-three years of study beyond their training as a general dentist, which emphasizes child psychology, growth and development, disease prevention, sedation, hospital dentistry and care for those patients with special health care needs.

The first visit to the pediatric dentist will be educational for parents. This "well baby check" helps ensure that parents learn the tools they'll need to help their child remain cavity free. Pediatric dentist offices feature "child friendly" treatments and an environment that best fits children's requirements. Parents can expect the pediatric dentist to: demonstrate proper methods of toothbrushing and flossing, evaluate oral and facial development, discuss the ability to detect early tooth decay and dietary issues, determine fluoride needs and much more.

The year one dental visit can actually *save* money. A study in the journal *Pediatrics* showed that children who have their first dental visit before age one have 40 percent lower dental costs in their first five years than children who do not, due to the cost of dental and medical procedures that may be necessary as a result of poor oral health.

4. How can parents choose the right dentist for their kids? Any special considerations to keep in mind?

The AAPD offers a tool on the organization's website that makes it easy for parents and caregivers to find a pediatric dentist in their area. To find a pediatric dentist, visit www.aapd.org/finddentist.

A few things parents should look for when choosing a pediatric dentist include specialized certification in pediatric dentistry, as well as a staff with special training and interest in treating children. The dental office should be set up for children with toys, books and games. You and your child should both feel very comfortable in the office.

After the first visit, ask yourself if your child was seen promptly, did the dentist and staff talk to your child and encourage involvement in dental health and finally, were you informed about your child's tooth development?

5. Finally, what are the five most important things that parents can do to keep kids' teeth healthy?

The five most important things that parents can do to keep their kids' teeth healthy are outlined in our handy check list below. Checking off each of these criteria will ensure that you are taking all the necessary steps to keep your children's teeth healthy.

- ✓ Visit the pediatric dentist before your child's first birthday and at least twice annually following the first appointment.
- ✓ Clean your infant's mouth and gums regularly with a soft infant toothbrush or cloth and water. Once baby teeth appear, brush them at least twice daily with an age-appropriate sized toothbrush and a small amount of fluoridated toothpaste.
- ✓ Encourage your toddlers to help brush their own teeth to instill important and routine oral health habits for taking care of their teeth later in life. Parents need to brush their child's teeth until they are capable of doing it themselves.
- ✓ Water fluoridation is still the number one way to prevent tooth decay. If your child does not have access to fluoridated water, pediatric dentists can advise parents about other sources of fluoride, such as fluoride supplements.
- ✓ Prevent tooth decay by reducing the intake of foods high in sugar and serving healthy meals to your child that include the recommended daily allowances of fruits and vegetables. Protein, vitamins and minerals, such as calcium and phosphorous, will build strong teeth and help your child's mouth to fight tooth decay and gum disease. Restrict your child to three meals a day and only two snacks. Restrict the use of sugar containing liquids to those times when food is being eaten. Encourage water as the right choice for a beverage throughout the day.