

Simple steps, good habits pay off for kids' teeth

By Dr. Eric Gustavsen, Published in the Walla Walla Union Bulletin 8/24/12

February is National Children's Dental Health month and is a good time to remind parents of some practical tips to keep their kids teeth healthy.

One of the habits that causes the most difficulty for younger children is parents sending them to bed with a bottle of formula, milk or apple juice. Anything but water has the capacity to cause cavities leading to "baby bottle caries" syndrome, where the front teeth decay leading to major problems and often a trip to see a children's dental specialist. Fortunately, we have an excellent children's dental group in Walla Walla to treat kids who need help at a young age.

Another practice that can lead to cavities is feeding your child from the same spoon or cup you have just used. If you have had cavities you are transmitting those germs to your child and they will likely get cavities as well. If you are prone to cold sores the virus that causes them can also be transmitted in this way.

Be very careful what snacks you give kids as anything that's sweet, or with carbohydrates that sticks to the teeth, can cause decay, such as fruit roll ups, crackers and even raisins. It's best to brush their teeth before a nap if they have just had a snack as the saliva slows down during naps and the "sugar bugs" get active. Giving kids snacks of whole fruits, cheese, nuts or whole grain products will reduce the likelihood of getting decay. Soda should only be given to kids on special occasions because frequent drinking leads to cavities from the sugar and acid in the soda. Diet soda can also cause decay because of the phosphoric and citric acid it contains.

The American Dental Association recommends kids should have their first dental checkup before the first birthday, however if you notice anything unusual about their new teeth, such as discoloration or dark spots, you should definitely have them checked out as soon as possible.

Dental examinations, cleanings and professional fluoride applications should be scheduled every six months with your child's dentist as decay can progress very rapidly in baby teeth, from a hardly noticeable spot to a cavity infecting the nerve of the tooth in less than a year.

Kids need help brushing and flossing their teeth until 7 or 8 years of age. With younger wiggly ones it is sometimes helpful to floss their teeth while they lie on the bed or with their head in your lap. That way they can't wriggle away and you can clean in between the molars in the back where a toothbrush can't reach and cavities often start. For younger kids using a brush may not be practical so you may want to try using a clean damp washcloth, rubbing it across the teeth with your finger. Another toothbrush substitute is a innovative product called Spiffies made of a soft fabric that fits over your index finger like a finger puppet. They contain a natural sugar called xylitol that is very effective in establishing healthy non-cavity causing bacteria in kids' mouths. If you are having trouble locating Spiffies talk to your dental office and they can order them for you. It's very important to establish a daily routine with your child of brushing and flossing before bedtime and brushing before heading off to school in the morning.

Finally, be very careful that you use a toothpaste made for kids. Put only a small pea sized amount on the brush and make sure the kids don't swallow. If kids swallow too much toothpaste when their adult teeth are forming it can cause a discoloration in the enamel called fluorosis. Kids need a small amount of fluoride to make their developing adult teeth strong, but getting too much is to be avoided.

These simple steps can lead to a lifetime of good dental health.