



Brush Up on Oral Health

Understanding Why Primary Teeth Are Important

Some parents believe that primary (baby) teeth are less important than permanent teeth because primary teeth are going to “fall out anyway.” However, primary teeth are key to a child’s growth and development. Head Start staff play a vital role in helping parents understand the importance of primary teeth to good oral health and overall health and well-being.

This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet talks about why primary teeth are important and offers information that Head Start staff can share with parents.



Information About Primary Teeth to Share with Parents

- **Primary teeth are important.** Primary teeth are key to young children’s health and development in five ways. These include:
 - **Maintaining good health.** The health of primary teeth affects children’s overall health and well-being. Tooth decay in primary teeth can lead to abscessed teeth. Infections from abscessed teeth can spread to other areas in the head and neck and lead to fever, pain, severe swelling, and, in rare cases, death. Using antibiotics to treat dental infections may work temporarily. However, infections will always come back if tooth decay is not treated.
 - **Maintaining good nutrition.** To grow and be strong, children need to eat healthy foods. Children with tooth decay in their primary teeth are less likely to eat crunchy foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables that promote good nutrition and a healthy body. These children are also at risk for developing nutritional deficiencies and becoming malnourished.
 - **Helping with the development of speech.** Losing teeth early due to tooth decay can interfere with the development of a young child’s speech. Young children with missing teeth have difficulty making “th,” “la,” and other sounds. This can make it hard for others to understand the child. In some cases, the child



may need speech therapy to change speech patterns he or she developed because of missing teeth.

- **Maintaining space for permanent teeth.** Primary teeth hold space for permanent teeth developing underneath them in the jaw. This picture of an X-ray shows permanent teeth developing below primary teeth. If primary teeth are lost too early, other teeth move into the space and block the incoming permanent teeth. This can cause crowding.
- **Promoting self-confidence.** Young children can be quick to call attention to other children that have decayed, chipped, or discolored teeth. Children with visible tooth decay often do not smile, cover their mouth with their hands when they speak, or minimize interaction with others. A healthy smile gives children the self-confidence they need to have positive social experiences.
- **Tooth decay in primary teeth matters.**
 - Children with pain from tooth decay do not do as well in school and have more behavior problems than children with no pain.
 - Tooth decay can also spread from one tooth to another. Children with severe tooth decay may need to receive treatment in a hospital operating room.
- **Brushing primary teeth with fluoride toothpaste every day promotes good oral health.** As soon as the first tooth appears, parents should begin brushing a baby's tooth with a smear (rice-sized amount) of fluoride toothpaste twice a day. Making this a daily habit lowers the amount of bacteria in the mouth, helps prevent tooth decay, and starts a lifetime of good oral health habits.
- **Having a dental visit by age 1 promotes good oral health.** The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that a child have his or her first dental visit by age 1. A young child's dental visit is simple and quick. The oral health professional looks in the child's mouth, identifies potential problems, and explains what changes to expect in the child's mouth as he or she develops and grows. The oral health professional also shows parents how to take care of their child's teeth and may apply fluoride varnish to the child's teeth.
- Head Start staff can share Healthy Habits for Happy Smiles: [Understanding Why Baby Teeth Are Important](#) with parents to reinforce conversations about primary teeth.

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