



Child Care Resources Inc.

## tip sheet

Ideas and information about child development and early education for parents, professionals and the community-at-large.

# #571

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## child care search

Resource & referral service

Mecklenburg County ..... (704) 348-2181  
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# Why Are Baby Teeth Important?

For most children, baby teeth (primary teeth) begin coming in around six months of age, but can vary for each child. Whenever primary teeth do begin to show, they have several different important jobs the moment they break through the gums.

Primary teeth hold a place and serve as spacers for the permanent teeth that come later. Healthy baby teeth also assist in speech development and jaw and facial formation. Primary teeth also make it possible for babies to begin chewing and biting foods, which is necessary for proper nutrition.

Decay and early loss of these baby teeth can cause loss of space for the permanent teeth, which leads to the permanent teeth shifting and thus leads to orthodontic problems for young children. With this in mind, the need for proper oral hygiene for babies is clear. Start early in caring for a child's teeth.

### Cleaning Baby Teeth

The gums and first teeth can be cleaned with a wet cloth, gauze pad or infant toothbrush. While a toothbrush isn't necessary, it can get a baby in the habit of brushing. If you use toothpaste, be sure it's toothpaste designed for infants. Infant and baby toothpaste is fluoride free and can be swallowed. Since babies aren't use to spitting toothpaste out and will have a tendency to swallow, this could lead to an overdose of fluoride if adult toothpaste is used.

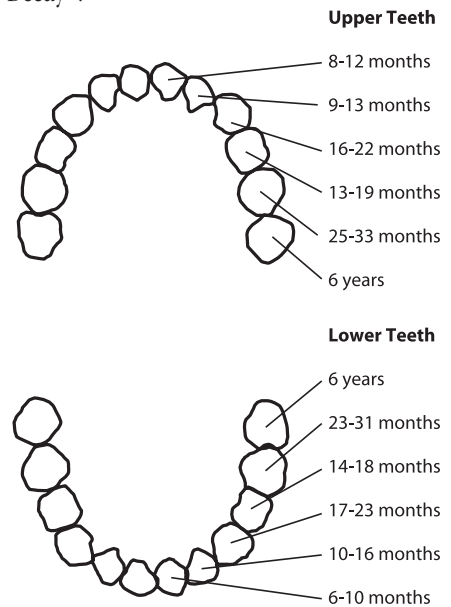
When brushing baby teeth, be soft and gentle. A baby's teeth and gums are very soft and delicate, so vigorous brushing is not necessary. It's also recommended to brush a baby's tongue, since it can also carry germs.

While it's ideal to brush a baby's teeth after every meal, it's not always practical. A routine where there is a morning and evening cleaning, preferably after meals, is recommended.

The most important time to brush is just before bed. Since the production of saliva decreases during sleep, a baby's mouth should be clean before bedtime, which will prevent bacteria and plaque from lying on and decaying the teeth during the night.

### Baby Bottle Tooth Decay

Each year a large number of infants and young children experience tooth decay from milk, juices and other liquids being given to them in a bottle at bedtime. This decay from milk and juice is called "Baby Bottle Tooth Decay".



When a baby falls asleep, the production of saliva decreases significantly. If a baby is given milk, juice or other sugary liquid and is then put to bed without brushing, the sugar in these liquids along with the bacteria that is naturally present in a baby's mouth join together to form an acid, which starts attacking and decaying the teeth. Prevention is the key. To prevent baby bottle tooth decay:

- Don't put a baby to bed for the night with a bottle of milk or juice. Most juices contain

natural sugars, while milk contains sugar called lactose, which bacteria can also use to create acid, thus causing the decay.

- Don't let a baby use a bottle of milk or juice as a pacifier. Lying around all day sucking at will on the bottle can be as harmful to teeth as putting a baby to bed at night with a bottle.
- Don't give a baby a pacifier that has been dipped in a sugary substance. While this is tempting to try calming a fussy baby, it can cause damage to teeth.
- Give a baby a bottle of milk a little before bedtime. This gives you time to brush the baby's teeth before bedtime.
- The last thing a baby should drink at night should be plain water.

### **Dental plaque and tooth decay**

Plaque is a sticky film on the teeth that contains bacteria and germs. It forms daily in the mouth and cannot be seen. Plaque germs use sugar as their food to produce acid, which attacks the enamel of the tooth, causing tooth decay.

In North Carolina, a special program called "Into the Mouths of Babes- NC Dental Screening and Varnish Project " has been developed to help prevent tooth decay in children under three. The program is the collaborative effort of The NC Academy of Family Physicians, the NC Pediatric Society, the NC Division of Medical Assistance, the NC Oral Health Section, the UNC School of Dentistry, and the UNC School of Public Health.

How does the program work? During a well-child checkup, medical providers check and varnish the child's teeth with fluoride to make them stronger and more resistant to cavities. The varnish can be applied several times during the first three years and is reimbursed by Medicaid.

Parents should be informed of this program so they can contact their pediatrician for more information. Additional information is available on the Academy of Family Physicians, Inc.'s website at [www.ncafp.com](http://www.ncafp.com) or by calling the project coordinator Kelly Haupt at 919-833-2466.