Preparing for the Age 1 Dental Visit

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Choosing a Dentist for Your Infant

In recent years, most dental schools have prepared new graduates to provide care to young children. But many dentists are less familiar and less comfortable with infants and toddlers.

Here are two ways to find a dentist who cares for young children:

- Call the dentist’s office and ask, “At what age does your office recommend that children be seen for their first dental visit?” Look for an office that suggests your child be seen when the first tooth appears or by the child’s first birthday.
- Look for a pediatric dentist who specializes in the care of young children. To find a pediatric dentist, try one of the following:
  - Ask your family dentist for a name.
  - Check your local phone book.
  - Go to the website of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry at www.aapd.org and click on “Find a Pediatric Dentist.”

Preventing Early Childhood Cavities

But cavities aren’t all that parents need to learn about their child’s dental health. The age 1 dental visit lets parents discuss:

- How to care for an infant’s or toddler’s mouth
- Proper use of fluoride
- Oral habits, including finger and thumb sucking
- Ways to prevent accidents that could damage the face and teeth
- Teething and milestones of development
- The link between diet and oral health

After this first visit, the dentist will suggest a schedule of follow-up visits. In the past, dentists typically called for visits every six months. Now, the schedule may vary according to each child’s needs and risks. As your child grows, the dental team can help you learn how to prevent common oral problems.

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Preparing for the Age 1 Dental Visit

The purpose of the age 1 dental visit is to learn about your child’s oral health and how to best care for your child’s unique needs before any problems occur. Many dental problems can be prevented or more easily treated in the early stages. It’s important to find a dentist you trust and an office where you feel comfortable. At this first visit, you will get your questions answered and start to build a relationship.

The best way to prepare for this visit is to consider what you want to know, what you want to look for and what you should expect.

Be prepared to ask about any concerns you may have. Be prepared to look for an office that is:

- Child and parent friendly
- Knowledgeable about young children’s oral health, growth and development
- Responsive to you
- Gentle and kind toward your child even if your child creates a fuss when the dentist or hygienist looks in your child’s mouth
- Focused on your child’s specific needs
- Specific about advice on how to care for your child’s mouth and teeth and willing to show you how to do it

The right office for you and your child will also:

- Tell you how to reach the office in case of an accident or dental emergency
- Give specific advice about regular follow-up care
- Tell you about what will happen next in your child’s oral development
- Help you to guard and promote your child’s oral health

Dentists and pediatricians are calling this type of office a child’s “dental home.”

Your child may fuss during parts or all of the dental visit. However, parents may be surprised at how accepting infants can be when the dentist examines them. They may enjoy the attention and novelty of the visit.

If possible, ask another adult to come with you. It’s best if this is someone who helps to care for your child. You want to be free to talk comfortably with the dentist or hygienist and to focus attention on your child. For this reason, it is best not to bring other children along at this first visit. Bring an extra diaper and snack for your child. Also bring a favorite toy, blanket or other familiar object. This will help your child to know that the dental office is a comfortable and safe place.

To save time and make the first visit easier, ask the dental office to mail you all the forms you will need to fill out. The forms may offer the chance to list questions or concerns that you want to discuss at the visit.

What To Expect at the Office

The age 1 care visit is similar to a well-baby check at the physician’s office.

At the visit, you should expect the dentist or hygienist to:

- Review your child’s history
- Respond to your questions and concerns
- Talk with you about your child’s overall oral health, including:
  - Development
  - Teething
  - Bite (how your child’s teeth will come together)
Soft tissues such as gums and cheeks
- Oral habits such as sucking
- Factors that affect the risk of cavities, such as diet, hygiene practices, fluoride use and whether others in the family have had cavities
- How to prevent trauma to your child's mouth

Thoroughly examine your child's mouth in the knee-to-knee position. You and the dentist sit on chairs facing each other. Your child sits on your lap, facing you. You then lay your child back with his or her head in the dentist's lap. In this position, both you and dentist can see clearly into your child's mouth and your child can look up at you.

- Show how to clean your child's teeth and give you a chance to practice
- Give specific advice about home care, including hygiene, diet and use of toothpaste and other fluorides
- Tell you what to expect as your child grows and develops in the coming months
- Suggest a schedule for follow-up care

The dentist or hygienist may also clean your child's teeth. This is likely to occur if your child's teeth have a stain that commonly appears in infants. The dentist or hygienist also may apply fluoride, particularly if your child has a higher than average risk of developing cavities.

Before leaving the office, you should have a clear idea about:

- Your child's development
- Your responsibilities
- Follow-up care by the dentist
- Your child's likelihood of having problems with cavities or bite

You should have your questions answered. You also should know what you and the dentist can do together to make sure your child has excellent oral health.

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