

Get Ready for a Good Dental Checkup!

Strong baby teeth are essential to a child's health. Some dentists may want to see a child when the first tooth erupts. Others may want to wait until the child's first birthday. Between visits, you can help your child learn about good dental habits—learning with lasting benefits!

Model good dental hygiene for your child.

Dentists suggest that you model choosing water instead of sweet drinks when you are thirsty. Let your child see you brush and floss regularly. Explain what you are doing. Let him watch you clean a pet's teeth. If your dentist agrees, let your toddler observe your dental checkup or an older sibling's (if the sibling is not afraid of the dentist).

Start good habits early.

Your child can learn good dental habits long before she can clean her own teeth. Dentists suggest that parents carefully wipe a baby's gums, tongue, and teeth gently every day with a clean, soft, damp cloth, piece of gauze, or baby toothbrush. (Use only water until the dentist says you can switch to toothpaste.) A toddler can brush teeth with adult help when he is able to spit out toothpaste. Squeeze a pea-sized amount onto a soft child-size toothbrush for him. You may need to gently guide the toothbrush to reach all the parts of his mouth.

Make dental health fun.

Share picture books about teeth and dentists. Look at animal teeth in zoos and museums. Visit dental association Web sites, which may have videos and other activities for children about dental health. You can help your child get used to opening his mouth for the dentist by playing "How Many Teeth?" and other "open mouth" games. A toddler or preschooler may want to pretend play "dentist's office."

Ask other parents or your health care provider to recommend a dentist.

Many family dentists and pediatric dentists specialize in working with babies and children. Dental office staff should be willing to answer your questions over the phone. You might visit the office first by yourself to see what the office and staff are like. Some dentists will allow a "pre-visit"—a special time to meet the child and show her around the office. NOTE: Dentists and their staff have special words for what they do. They also know words to avoid, like pull, hurt, shot, needle, and drill! So they may want to explain equipment and procedures to a child, rather than having you do so.

Take it easy at the dentist's office.

Bring along books and comfort toys. Arrive a bit early so you and your child can look around and meet the staff. Expect to stay with your child during the checkup.

For related Web resources, see "Get Ready for a Good Dental Checkup!" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

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