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A BABY'S FIRST DENTAL VISIT

A frequently-asked question, especially from new parents, is: When should my child first see the dentist?

The first visit should be by one year of age

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and the American Dental Association both recommend that the first visit should be by the baby's first birthday. Stated differently, the first visit should be within six months of the eruption of the first tooth. The hope is to create a "dental home" for all infants, children, adolescents, and persons with special health care needs.

Why so early?

Dental problems often start very early, and are more easily addressed if caught early. The baby will have a few teeth by then, so it is a good time for new parents to learn the basics of caring for the child's teeth. Problems like baby bottle tooth decay, teething irritation, gum disease, and thumb sucking can be effectively addressed with special attention.

"But they are just baby teeth, which will fall out."

A child's primary, or "baby," teeth are just as important as the permanent adult teeth. The first primary teeth normally erupt when a baby is between six months and one year. Furthermore, healthy baby teeth are important for your child to learn to chew and to speak properly and to smile with confidence. The teeth also hold space in the jaw for the permanent teeth growing underneath.

Tips for a child's first dental visit.

There are many things a parent can do to make the child's first visit memorable, and positive, as the foundation for a lifetime of good oral health:

- Choose the dentist carefully. Ideally, choose one who clearly sees many young children. The office should be inviting to young children, and designed with their special needs in mind. A pediatric dentist is an obvious good choice.
- Let the young child warm up to the idea of visiting the dentist. Many pediatric dentists encourage parents to visit the office with the new patient one or more times before the first exam. This tends to remove much of the first appointment jitters. If possible, also let the child watch older siblings or friends visit the same dentist.
- Select a morning appointment, when children are fresh and generally in a better mood.
- Lastly, parents need to guard against expressing their own anxiety, if any, about the dentist. Children, even very young ones, are quite sensitive to these attitudes.

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