

WHY BABY TEETH ARE IMPORTANT

People usually think of a newborn baby as having no teeth. But the 20 primary (baby) teeth that will erupt in the next two and a half years are already present in the baby's jaw at birth. Most of the crowns of the primary teeth are almost completely developed, and the chewing surfaces of the permanent molars have begun forming.

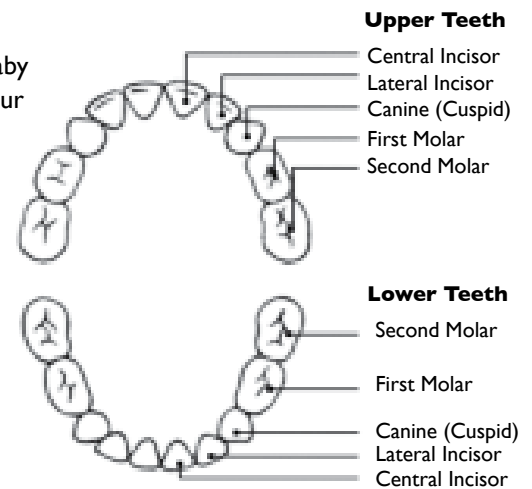
Primary teeth are just as important as permanent teeth—for chewing, speaking, and appearance. In addition, the primary teeth hold the space in the jaw for permanent teeth. Both primary and permanent teeth help give the face its shape and form.

THE TEETHING CYCLE

When teeth begin erupting, some babies may have sore or tender gums. Gently rubbing your child's gums with a wet wash cloth or gauze can be soothing. You can also give the baby a clean teething ring to chew on. If your child is still cranky and uncomfortable, consult your dentist or physician. Contrary to common belief, fever is not normal for a teething baby. If your infant has a fever while teething, call your physician.

A baby's front two upper and lower teeth usually erupt first, beginning around six months after birth. Most children have a full set of 20 primary teeth by the time they are three years old.

As your child grows, the jaw also grows, making room for the permanent teeth which will begin to erupt at about age six. This process of tooth eruption usually lasts until age twelve when the permanent second molars erupt and the last baby teeth are lost. During permanent tooth eruption, the roots of the primary teeth begin to be absorbed by the adult teeth which are growing beneath them. Some permanent teeth may erupt later if there is not enough room for them, or may not erupt at all.



PREVENTING DECAY OF PRIMARY TEETH

As soon as teeth appear in the mouth, decay can occur. One of the risk factors for early childhood caries (formerly known as baby bottle tooth decay) is frequent and prolonged exposure of a baby's teeth to liquids containing sugar, like sweetened water and fruit juice, and to a lesser degree, breast milk and formula. Milk contains a form of sugar called lactose and can cause tooth decay if ingested frequently or at night. Tooth decay can occur when parents or caregivers put a baby to bed with a bottle or nurse on demand.

Infants should finish their bedtime and naptime bottle before going to bed. If you use a pacifier, use a clean one. Never dip a pacifier in sugar or honey before giving it to a baby. Ask your child's physician or dentist to recommend a type of pacifier.

The preschool years are an important time to help your child establish good eating habits. To help maintain a balanced diet for your child, select foods from the five main food groups—fruits, vegetables, meat and beans, grains, and dairy. Try to limit between-meal snacking. If your child needs a snack, choose nutritious foods from the main food groups rather than offering cookies, candy and other sweet or sticky foods.

“HOLDING OPEN SPACE” FOR PERMANENT TEETH

Sometimes a primary tooth is lost before the permanent tooth beneath it is ready to erupt. If a primary tooth is lost too early, nearby teeth can tip or shift into the vacant space. When the permanent tooth is ready to emerge into space, there may not be enough room for it. The new tooth may be unable to emerge or may emerge in an abnormal position.

If your child loses a tooth prematurely, the dentist may recommend a space maintainer—a plastic or metal appliance that holds open the space left by the missing tooth. The dentist will remove this device once the permanent tooth begins to erupt.

WHY BABY TEETH ARE IMPORTANT (CONT...)

KEEPING YOUR CHILD'S TEETH HEALTHY

Begin cleaning the baby's mouth and gums during the first few days after birth. After each feeding, wipe the baby's gums with a clean gauze pad or cloth. This removes plaque and residual food that can harm erupting teeth. To clean your child's teeth we recommend sitting on a sofa with your child's head in your lap. Be sure you can see into the child's mouth easily.

When your child's teeth begin to erupt, brush them gently with a child's size toothbrush and water. Around age two, you can use a small amount (about the size of a grain of rice) of fluoridated toothpaste. Always supervise your young children while brushing and encourage them to spit out excess saliva and toothpaste.

Use floss as soon as your child's teeth touch each other. At First Impressions, we can demonstrate how to floss or recommend products that make it easier for you to floss your child's teeth.

As your child's first tooth erupts, talk with your dentist about scheduling your child's first visit. It is a good idea to have the first dental visit within six months after the first tooth erupts, but no later than the first birthday. Talk about the visit in a positive, informative manner, as you would any new experience. Explain that the dentist is a friendly doctor who helps you take good care of your teeth. Make sure your little one visits the dentist regularly to help keep teeth cavity-free for life.

