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Raising Street-Smart Children



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In a scene from a television commercial, a man is about to be offered a job until he smiles and exposes his unsightly stained teeth. In the next scene, the same man's mouth opens into a pearly white smile and the job is instantly his. Look after your teeth and they will look after you, that's the principal message.

The scenario depicted may reflect real-life situations more than we imagine. A recent survey backed by the Academy of General Dentistry in Chicago and Oral-B laboratories suggests

Having said this, if you have not already got a good routine set up at home for your five-year-old, it is never too late to get one in gear, but do it now or it will really be too late.

Brush Up On Brushing!

If you want your child to have a bright smile that will last him a lifetime, you need to encourage him to brush his

teeth regularly, demonstrate how it is done and supervise him regularly thereafter.

Brushing is the single most important exercise for his teeth. Make sure he brushes his teeth at least twice a day, as part of his morning and bedtime routine.

Brushing, combined with flossing, helps remove a sticky film of bacteria

Charlotte MC Lee shares some tips on how to encourage good dental hygiene in your child



Brush Up,

that a dazzling grin may boost someone's success at work. Of the 40% who were interviewed, the first thing they noticed about a colleague was his or her smile.

Unfortunately, a brilliant smile cannot be produced overnight. In our present age of modern science and dental breakthroughs, the simple basics are still far more important. Good oral habits need to be nurtured from young and these include regular brushing, flossing, good nutrition and diet. In fact, many dental experts advocate that proper oral hygiene can begin even from birth, before babies cut their first teeth.

According to the American Dental Association, the 20 primary teeth that appear over the first two and a half years are already present in a newborn's jawbone and it is never too early to cultivate a regular routine of good oral hygiene.



called plaque, a main cause of cavities and gum disease. The food your child eats can cause the bacteria in his mouth to produce acids that attack the tooth surface and cause decay. This sequence of events occurs as soon as your child has eaten and carries on for at least 20 minutes, which is why cleaning his teeth soon after a meal is essential.

Sweet stuff like candies and cookies are not the only culprits. Starches in breads, crackers and cereals also cause acids to form and if your kid

snacks often, he could be having acid attacks the whole day. This means bad news for his teeth!

Gum Disease In Children

Plaque produces substances that irritate gums, making them tender, red and bleed easily. Gums may also pull away from the teeth, causing pockets to form and fill with bacteria and pus. If gums are left untreated, these toxins eventually progress to the underlying bone, fracturing the structures that affix the teeth to the mouth.

curve the floss around the teeth and gently scrape the plaque off.

Dr Tan, on the other hand, believes that you can wait until your child is about 10 before you introduce flossing. He says, "When kids are young, there is still space between teeth and brushing alone will usually remove the food and plaque found in between teeth. At about 10, children will have half their permanent teeth out and the space in between their teeth closes up. At that age, they will also have the dexterity to handle the floss and not cut themselves."

When introducing the floss, make it a game and show some enthusiasm for it. If you set a good example by flossing your own teeth daily, he will pick up the healthy habit quite easily. Be mindful not to order or nag him to brush or floss. That is a definite turn-off.

The Right Tools

Choosing the right toothbrush is the very first step in oral care. Should you choose one with hard or soft bristles? Dr Tan recommends nylon toothbrushes with soft, round-ended bristles. As for the size of the toothbrush head, if your kid's mouth is small, look for a compact head to fit his mouth and one that can reach all areas inside.

Look also for interesting toothbrush designs, especially those with his favourite storybook or cartoon character. Let him brush his own teeth while standing on a footstool in front of the sink. Since you have to set a good example, brush your own teeth at the same time.

Check your child's toothbrush often and replace it if bristles are bent or frayed, because these are useless for cleaning teeth. A change is required usually every six to eight weeks. If your child has had the flu or cold, it would be wise to get a new toothbrush, too.

Junior!

They may become loose or may need to be extracted.

Periodontal or gum disease is one of the main causes of tooth loss in adults but it can strike at any age. Even children as young as five or six can show signs of this disease, so remember to get your kid to brush up!

Flossing teeth is just as important in the entire dental process. It removes plaque and food particles from between the teeth and under the gumline, areas where your toothbrush cannot reach. This is crucial for preventing gum disease and dental caries.

Some experts recommend that parents floss the child's teeth until he is able to cooperate. One suggested technique is to use a floss recommended by your child's dentist and gently insert the floss between his teeth using a slow, sawing motion. Then



If Junior Won't Brush...

It is important to realise that young children do not have the motor skills required to properly brush their teeth on their own until they are about six to eight years old. If, by then, your child still won't brush, try not to use force. Check his toothbrush for soft bristles and the right head size, and the toothpaste for not-so-strong-mint taste, to see if they are right for him.

Tips To Encourage Junior To Brush His Teeth:

- A reward system will go a long way in motivating a child to do something. "Put up an award chart on the wall and give him a star sticker each time he does as he is told," says Dr Tan. You can reward him with a small gift or an outing when he collects a number of stickers.
- Don't scare him with horror stories about the dentist's drill or he may develop a phobia for them and reject future dental visits. Impress upon him how visits to the dentist are fun and helpful in making his teeth look nice when he smiles. Tell him how everyone loves to see him smile and how brushing his teeth regularly will keep his smile nice and the people around him happy and pleased. When he does brush, be encouraging and compliment your child for his effort.
- Bring him to a dentist you know who will try to make him feel comfortable and who will be gentle, patient and understanding. School dental nurses can be pretty foreboding so select your dentist carefully. Call the dentist to inform him of your child's fears. The first visit need not be for treatment, but to chat about your child's dental routine at home.
- You can see a family dentist or a paedodontist (a paediatric dentist who is professionally-trained to deal with children's dental health). There are but a handful of paedodontists in Singapore. You will find instead that many dentists specialise in orthodontics or cosmetic dental surgery. If your child has a real fear of the dentist, perhaps a visit to the paedodontist would be a more ideal alternative.
- Make a dental visit into an outing by bringing other friends along to 'check-out' the dental equipment. Usually a show, tell and do approach is recommended by dentists to build up a child's confidence and interest in the dental process.
- Don't give up on your child's teeth even if his aversion to toothbrushing may seem like it will never cease. They are far too precious to ignore. Set a good example and make sure your own teeth are well-cared for so he learns to appreciate the importance of keeping teeth clean.

Sweet Tooth

A child who has a sweet tooth will run into dental problems sooner than another on a healthy, sensible diet. "Monitor your child's snack habits," is Dr Tan's advice to parents. Avoid giving him snacks that are not only high in sugar or starch, but also these that stick to his teeth as those promote decay, such as candy, soft drinks, cookies, cakes, raisins, potato chips, pretzels and dried fruit.

Healthier (and not just for teeth) options should include milk, cheese, plain yoghurt, raw vegetables, nuts, sunflower seed, plain popcorn and best of all, water. If he does indulge once in a while on something sweet, just be sure he brushes his teeth.

"You don't always have to police his eating habits but allow him snack breaks only when he asks for your permission and make sure other caregivers and members of the family enforce the same rules about snacking," adds Dr Tan. As in the case of discipline, consistency is vital to achieve the desired results of good dental health.

Teeth, Gum And Paste

There are a myriad of toothpastes available in the market - from all-natural to teeth-whitening varieties. You are safe as long as your toothpaste has fluoride in it because you need it to fight cavities.

Most kids don't like the

mint-flavoured toothpaste adults find so refreshing. The younger ones prefer bubblegum, sparkle or fruit-flavoured kids' toothpaste. Older children can use paste that contains a milder mint-flavour but be sure they are able to spit out all of the toothpaste as these tend to have a higher concentration of fluoride, Dr Tan cautions.

Too much of a good thing can cause other problems, too. If a child uses too much toothpaste, he may suffer from a discolouration of the tooth enamel or fluorosis, a cosmetic defect that is characterised by white patches on the teeth, or stained teeth, in severe cases. "To avoid getting fluorosis, watch that he uses only a pea-sized amount of toothpaste and teach him not to swallow the paste while brushing," says Dr Tan.

Regular Check-Ups

Instituting a good home dental plan is not enough without some professional help. Visiting your dentist regularly is the key to healthy teeth and gums. Start bringing your kid for routine check-ups by the time he is two to three years old, as kids this age will have all their primary teeth and will also be able to sit still for a period of time.

Experts advise that children and adults should see their dentists at least twice a year for routine check-ups. Preventive maintenance is critical in promoting good oral health.