

Child's First Dental Appointment

Your child should generally see a dentist when he gets his first tooth, or by age one at the latest — “First visit by first birthday” is a good rule of thumb, according to both the American Dental Association and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

Your child's first visit to the dentist should be low-key and comfortable. As parents, you should feel very comfortable with the dentist before he or she examines your child. To make sure everything looks healthy, the dentist will check both your child's teeth and gums. She will pay particularly close attention to any sign of baby bottle tooth decay, a common problem in infants and toddlers.

The dentist will also offer valuable advice for preventing future cavities. For instance, the dentist may recommend giving your child fluoride drops with an eyedropper, especially if your water isn't fluoridated. She will also suggest a schedule for future dental visits, usually once every six months or so. Make sure your child has a well-balanced diet, with plenty of calcium and fresh fruit and vegetables.

Like anyone else, young children need teeth to chew food and talk clearly. Just as important, baby teeth help create space for permanent teeth. If any baby teeth fall out or rot away before their time, permanent teeth may come in crowded and crooked. A dentist can intervene by installing an appliance called a “space maintainer,” but it's a shallow substitute for a real tooth. That's why it's important to make sure that you take care of baby teeth — your child's future dental health depends on it.

Many children have never seen a dental chair or heard a drill, and yet they cry as soon as they



enter the office. Fortunately, many dentists who work with children are experts at calming such fears. They'll take things slowly and gently, dish out heaps of praise, and may even have a fun toy as a reward at the end of the visit!

It also helps to schedule an appointment early in the day when your child is alert and less likely to be cranky. Talk with your child about the visit, but don't be specific about what will happen, and don't use words like “pull” or “jab.” Seeing you chat with the dentist will encourage you child to think of the visit as painless.

Most dentists let parents sit by their child's side. If you have an older child, however, the exam might go more smoothly if you stay in the waiting room. Above all, try not to show too much anxiety of your own. If you stay upbeat about dentists and dental care, your child will most likely follow your lead.

E. Keith Phillips, D.D.S.