

Every baby was born to smile

Douglas M. Bush, Executive Director, Indiana Dental Association, Indianapolis

Most of us grew up hearing that the fundamentals of preventive dentistry were simple: brush, floss and avoid sugary foods. And while those steps are important, dentists are communicating to parents that there is more to preventive dental care, especially for young children.

"We now know more about the dental disease process," says Dr. Mark Stetzel, chair of the Indiana Dental Association's Born to Smile Committee. "Cavities form when harmful bacteria are allowed to grow inside your mouth. These bacteria feed on sugar. So while it is important to avoid sugary snacks, it is equally important to avoid the bacteria that start the dental disease process."



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Most children come into the world essentially with a "clean slate." Dental disease in children is almost 100 percent preventable. Avoiding dental disease helps children also avoid a whole host of other health-related issues throughout their entire lives.

Born to Smile is an educational initiative in Indiana that targets the parents of newborn children. Dentists are communicating to parents that there are steps they can take to care

for their children's teeth even before the first tooth appears.

"It is counterintuitive," said Dr. Stetzel. "If I have a newborn baby, the last thing I'm going to worry about is her teeth. But the truth is, there are steps parents can take to start their newborns down the road to good dental health."

Start your baby on the road to lifelong oral health

The Indiana Dental Association offers parents the following tips:

Keep your own mouth as healthy as possible. The bacteria that cause dental disease can be passed from parent to child, so mom, dad and other caregivers should brush, floss and see their dentists regularly. Studies show that children of parents with active dental disease are far more likely to develop dental decay themselves. So take care of your child's teeth by making your own dental health a priority.

Avoid risky table manners. If you have active decay you can spread the germs that cause dental disease just as though you are passing a cold or flu bug to your child. So avoid sharing eating utensils with your child and allowing your baby to eat or drink after others. And never attempt to clean your baby's pacifier by placing it in your own mouth.

Do not feed your baby juices, sodas, flavored waters or sports drinks. The high sugar content in these drinks feeds the bacteria that cause dental decay. Milk and water are the healthiest drink choices for your child.

Do not allow your baby to sleep with a bottle or at mom's breast. Even milk can harm teeth if it is allowed to pool in the mouth and is not swallowed. "Baby Bottle Tooth Decay," one of the most common dental problems in young children, is directly related to infants falling asleep while drinking from a bottle.

Begin cleaning your child's teeth when they first appear using water and a fingertip toothbrush, gum massager or infant toothbrush. Talk to your dentist about when to begin adding fluoride toothpaste to your child's brushing routine.

Wean your child off of the bottle between 12-14 months. Schedule your child's first dental visit by his or her first birthday.

Tooth decay can begin as soon as teeth appear in your baby's mouth, so establish good preventive habits early. Remember, decay in primary (baby) teeth may damage permanent teeth that are forming inside the gums. If you suspect dental decay, contact your dentist immediately.

For more information, talk to your dentist and visit www.borntosmile.org.

