

Caring for children's teeth between ages 6 and 18

You can help your children literally make their permanent teeth permanent. Just teach your kids to take great care of their teeth at a young age for a healthy smile that can last a [lifetime](#).

While oral health care is important from birth, it's especially critical starting at age 6 when permanent teeth begin to come in. Tooth decay is one of the most common chronic diseases for kids and it's usually preventable.¹ Cavities and gum disease occur even more frequently as children reach adolescence — with 54% of kids ages 12 to 19 having had, or currently having, cavities.² That's why it's vital to learn and practice great oral health habits early. Here's how you can help children develop and maintain a healthy smile.

On average, children with good oral health perform better academically and miss fewer days of school than children with poor oral health.³

1. Encourage daily oral health care.

To help prevent cavities and gum disease, it's necessary to remove food and plaque that may linger in the mouth. [Teach your children to brush their teeth at least twice a day for two minutes each time and floss daily](#) to clean areas a toothbrush can't reach. Be sure your children use a soft-bristle toothbrush with a [pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste](#), which helps strengthen their teeth and prevent cavities. Change out their toothbrush or toothbrush head every three to four months to make sure it's effectively removing as much food and plaque as possible.

2. Take them to visit the dentist regularly.

Like adults, children should see a dentist at least once a year for a checkup and cleaning. Professional cleanings remove stains and tartar that brushing and flossing alone won't eliminate. In addition, your dentist and hygienist will show your child the best way to brush and floss. The dentist will also examine your child's teeth to detect and treat any cavities and other oral problems as early as possible.

If your child is at high risk for cavities, your child's dentist may recommend additional cavity-fighting strategies, such as a [fluoride](#) treatment to supplement the fluoride your child receives from toothpaste and tap water, if it's fluoridated.

When permanent molars start to come in around age 6 or 7, your child may benefit from [sealants](#) — thin, plastic protective coatings that keep food, bacteria and plaque out of the grooves in teeth.

Your dentist may also refer your child to an orthodontist. The specialist may recommend [braces](#) — usually beginning between ages 10 and 14 — to correct crowded or misaligned teeth that could otherwise lead to cavities or gum disease.

[Dental insurance](#) makes care more affordable and usually fully covers preventive measures like checkups, cleanings, fluoride treatments, and sealants for children.

3. Serve healthy foods.

Sugars and starches cause bacteria to produce acid that eats away at a tooth's surface — which often leads to cavities. Help your child avoid sugary and starchy snacks by providing smile-friendly alternatives like nuts, cheese, low-sugar yogurt, fruit and veggies. Mealtime should include a balanced diet of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and dairy products that offer the nutrients needed for a healthy body and smile.

4. Keep them hydrated.

Water is an excellent alternative to sugary sports drinks, juices and soda. It helps clean the mouth, while preventing cavity-causing dry mouth. Drinking tap water may also help protect against cavities in another way, as a majority of U.S. communities add cavity-fighting fluoride to their water supplies.

5. Purchase a mouth guard.

Playing contact sports like hockey, basketball, football, or wrestling can put your children at risk for lost and cracked teeth, along with damaged roots and crowns. Help protect them against mouth injuries by purchasing a [mouth guard](#) at a sporting goods store or having one custom-made by your dentist. A [mouth guard](#) should also be worn for any activities with the potential for mouth injuries, including skateboarding, biking, gymnastics, and more.

6. Talk to them about tobacco.

Because the overwhelming majority of smokers try their first cigarette by age 18,⁴ it's a good idea to start warning your children about the [dangers of tobacco](#) as early as age 5 and keep the conversation going throughout childhood.

While all tobacco (including vaping) is bad for overall health, it's also harmful to oral health as it can damage teeth and gums, cause tooth loss, yellow teeth and bad breath, and increases the risk of oral cancer.

Sources:

¹https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/basics/childrens-oral-health/fl_caries.htm

²<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db307.pdf>

³<https://aaphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2010.200915>

⁴https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/youth_data/tobacco_use/index.htm