



# Parent Pages

RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



## Healthy Teeth, Bright Smiles



**P**roverbs 25:19 makes a comparison between bad teeth and a treacherous man. This is a fair comparison given the amount of grief caused by tooth decay and infection. The best way to avoid teeth treachery for your children is to indulge in good dental care both early and often.

Dentists and other specialists recommend that checkups begin around twelve months of age. A dental check-up is part of your children's overall health because problems with teeth and gums can cause other health issues. Starting checkups early will allow your dentist to prevent problems and will begin to instill healthy dental habits for your child's lifetime. The added benefit of starting checkups this early is that infant check-

ups typically happen while the child sits in a parent's lap as the dental staff slowly introduce tools. This helps the child to connect feelings of security and interest with visits to the dentist's office.

While an infant will likely only remember the emotions connected to a dental visit, older children will be more curious and perhaps anxious because of a previous experience or because they are leery of medical visits. It might be helpful to look for a pediatric dentist with extra training in techniques for working with children. When your child asks what will happen, refrain from details and warnings. Just tell the simple truth that the dentist will use special tools to check and clean teeth. If your child is overly worried about pain, call ahead and give

the dentist a warning. Overall, it is good to teach your children that they can trust the dentist and hygienist so they will be less likely to be reluctant or worried.

Even though it is tempting, avoid the promise of a reward for good behavior. This may signal to the child that there is something to worry about. Instead, listen to your child's concerns and respond with reminders that you will be close and God will be even closer. During the appointment encourage your child to ask questions, and when the appointment is over point out the ways your child acted bravely by listening and following directions.

Building good dental habits is every bit as important as regular dental checkups. Here is a list of recommended practices for babies, toddlers and older children:

#### **BABIES:**

- Clean gums with a soft cloth and begin with an infant-size toothbrush when that first tooth pokes through.
- When teeth appear check for white or brown spots.
- Avoid allowing baby to fall asleep with a bottle as this can cause tooth decay.

#### **TODDLERS:**

- In the beginning, mom or dad should be in charge of the toothbrush. Talk about each area as you brush it so your child will learn the routine. When preschool-age children want to brush by themselves, allow them to do so and start the routine of checking their work and finishing up.
- Use a brush with soft bristles and purchase a new one every three months.
- Use a very small amount of fluoride toothpaste and teach your child to spit so toothpaste is not swallowed.
- Do your brushing routine at least twice each day and start flossing early.
- Limit sweets, especially sweet drinks like juice and soda. If there is not time to brush immediately after sweets, then teach your child to rinse and spit.



#### **OLDER CHILDREN:**

- By school age your children should be in charge of their daily dental health with periodic checks from you. Young children might feel more in charge if they are allowed to pick out their toothbrushes and toothpastes at the store.
- Purchase a timer, or find a timer app, to encourage your child to brush for a full two minutes, cleaning all sides of the teeth and the top of the tongue.
- Teach your child dental terms such as incisors (front teeth), molars (back teeth), plaque (bacteria that eats away at teeth) and gingivitis (gum disease). New vocabulary is always good as well as knowing the reasons why teeth need care.
- Send a travel toothbrush and toothpaste to school for use after lunch. Let your child's teacher know.
- Purchase a mouthguard for athletes. Replacing a permanent tooth is complicated and expensive, but losing a baby tooth too early will also cause problems.

If there is a family history of tooth decay or gum disease, it is especially important to start good dental habits and checkups early. Dental care will not change genetics, but it will help to reduce the severity of problems and help teeth to last longer. Teaching good dental habits works like teaching anything else worth learning. It requires practice, patience and modeling. The happy smile is the reward.