

Like parent, like child: Good oral health starts at home

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Parents are a child's first teacher in life and play a significant role in maintaining his or her overall health. Providing oral health education to mothers and families is essential to teaching children healthy habits and preventing early childhood tooth decay, according to an article published in the May/June 2010 issue of *General Dentistry*, the peer-reviewed clinical journal of the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD).

With all of the challenges that new parents face, they may not think much about the link between their child's [oral health](#) and overall health. In fact, an understanding of [oral hygiene](#) can help parents to prevent [tooth decay](#)—the single most common chronic childhood disease in America—and to create a lifetime of healthy habits for their child.

"Ideally, the oral health education for any family will begin with prenatal education and the establishment of a dental home by the time the child is 12 to 18 months of age," says Tegwyn Brickhouse, DDS, author of the study. "Many people don't realize that the oral health of the mother affects both the infant's future oral health and the child's overall health. In fact, some studies show that [periodontal disease](#) has been linked to preterm labor. That's why [pregnant women](#) should be evaluated for [cavities](#), poor oral hygiene, gingivitis, loose teeth and diet."

After the child is born, families should become familiar with their child's dental and oral health milestones, which will be determined by discussion with the family dentist or a pediatric dentist. Children should have their first dental visit at age 1 or within six months of the eruption

of their first tooth. A dentist will be able to discuss when parents can expect to see a child's first tooth and the best technique for brushing his or her new teeth.

Diet is another factor that affects a child's oral health. Frequent and long-term exposure to liquids that contain sugars commonly results in tooth decay. In addition to eliminating [sugary drinks](#) altogether from a child's diet, parents can adopt other habits to prevent tooth decay due to beverage consumption.

"Parents should avoid giving their children milk, formula, juice or soda at naptime or nighttime," says Bruce DeGinder, DDS, MAGD, spokesperson for the AGD. "The sugars will linger on their teeth and gums for a prolonged period of time, promoting decay."

Parents are responsible for their child's oral hygiene practices and are advised to meet with a general dentist to determine the best way to establish and maintain their child's oral health. A general dentist also can provide families with oral health literature that is designed to educate both the parent and child. This education has multiple benefits; as Dr. Brickhouse notes, "Healthy teeth in early childhood can provide a positive self-image and improve the child's quality of life."

Provided by Academy of General Dentistry

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