Top Tips for Children's Dental Hygiene | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/top-tips-for-childrens-dental-hygiene/

Details:

Children's dental hygiene can start before the first tooth appears. In the early months you can wipe your baby's gums with a clean, damp cloth after feeds, then move to an infant toothbrush and water when teething begins. From around 18 months a small, pea-sized amount of low-fluoride children's toothpaste is usually suggested. Children generally need help with brushing until around age 7. At Core Dental we support parents with this routine, and your dentist or dental therapist can tailor advice to your child.

How early should you start caring for your child's teeth?

Good habits are easiest to build when they begin early. Before teeth appear, many parents run a clean, damp cloth over their baby's gums after each feed. This helps clear away bacteria that can build up in the mouth.

When your child starts teething, you can brush their teeth with an infant toothbrush and water. Around age 2 to 3, you can begin teaching them about brushing and why it matters, by letting them watch you and have a turn with the brush. Once they have finished, brush again yourself so that all the plaque is removed. You can introduce flossing once teeth are touching each other.

How much toothpaste should children use, and does fluoride matter?

Fluoride helps protect teeth against decay. Baby teeth matter because they help guide the adult teeth developing underneath into the right position, so protecting them from decay and early loss is worthwhile. Our general guidance is:

From birth to around 18 months, brush your child's teeth without toothpaste.

From around 18 months to 5 years, use a small, pea-sized amount of low-fluoride children's toothpaste.

From around 5 years, a small, pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste, as your dentist advises. If your child still swallows toothpaste, keep using the low-fluoride kind.

Teach children to spit the toothpaste out but not to rinse, so that some fluoride stays on the teeth. Your dentist or dental therapist can confirm the right toothpaste for your child's age and risk of decay.

What can you do to prevent tooth decay in children?

Prevention is the foundation of children's oral health. These habits can make a real difference:

Avoid putting your child to bed with a bottle that holds anything other than water. Breast milk and formula also contain sugars, so frequent or prolonged exposure can raise the risk of decay.

Try to wean your child off a pacifier by age 2 to 3, as long-term use can affect how teeth line up.

Keep sugary snacks, soft drinks and juices for special occasions. If your child does have juice or soft drink, choose low or no sugar options and dilute with water.

Remember that after sugars are eaten, it can take the saliva around 30 minutes to neutralise the acid made by decay-causing bacteria. Frequent sugary snacks can mean the mouth is acidic for much of the day, which raises the chance of decay.

When should your child have their first dental visit?

Dental practitioners commonly suggest starting dental visits around a child's first birthday, with check-ups about twice a year after that. At Core Dental, children can visit us from age 2, and if you have a concern about a younger child you can call us to talk it through.

At a children's check-up your dentist or dental therapist can teach you how to prevent dental disease, check for cavities and look for any developmental issues. They may also suggest preventive options such as fissure sealants or protective dental pastes. Sealants cover the grooves on the chewing surfaces of teeth so that food is less likely to get stuck there.

Many families find that a child's dental visits are easier when parents stay relaxed. If you feel nervous about the dentist yourself, try not to pass this on to your child, and avoid words such as "hurt", "pain" or "needle", which can cause alarm.

How can you help your child feel comfortable at the dentist?

Familiarity helps. Taking your child along to your own check-up lets them see the chair, the lights and the team in a calm setting, and they can even have their own teeth counted. Over time this can reduce the chance of anxiety developing. If your child is already worried, our article on dental anxiety in children has practical ideas.

How can you help your child brush properly?

Children do not usually have the dexterity to brush well on their own until around age 7. You can guide their hand so they learn where the brush should go, then let them have a turn. Always check their teeth afterwards, because you will probably need to finish the job, especially at the hard-to-reach teeth at the back of the mouth.

How can you make brushing fun?

Getting children to stick with a routine can be a challenge. You might play music, turn brushing into a game, or let your child choose their own toothbrush in a favourite colour or character. A short, predictable routine morning and night usually works better than a long one.

How can we help?

Our team can look after your child's teeth and answer your questions about brushing, toothpaste and sealants at any of our nine Core Dental practices. Eligible children aged 0 to 17 may be able to have a check-up bulk billed under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule, so please ask when you book. Call 13 13 16 or book online.

The signs of early decay, which are hard for parents to see

The most useful thing a parent can know about children's teeth is what early decay looks like, because the published advice is blunt about how easily it is missed.

The Victorian Department of Health: "Tooth decay develops over time and can be difficult to see in the early stages."

Its three stages, in order:

"a dull white band on the tooth surface closest to the gum line - this is the first sign of decay and is hard for parents to spot"

"a yellow, brown or black band on the tooth surface closest to the gum line - this shows progression to decay"

"teeth that look like brownish-black stumps this is advanced decay."

A dull white band near the gum line, on the tooth closest to the gum. That is the first sign, and the Department says plainly that it is "hard for parents to spot".

Why spotting it early matters so much. "In the very early stages, early childhood decay can be reversed with advice and possibly treatment by a dentist or other dental practitioner. Because the early stages can be difficult to spot, in most cases early childhood decay is not picked up until the later, more serious stages. At this time it cannot be reversed and the child may need major dental treatment."

Reversible early, not reversible later, and usually caught late. That sequence is the whole argument for check-ups rather than watchfulness.

Why baby teeth are more vulnerable. "Every child is at risk of tooth decay. The enamel (hard outer layer) of baby teeth is much thinner and softer, putting them at greater risk of decay. The good news is that tooth decay is largely preventable."

And why they matter even though they fall out. "Baby teeth help children to eat and speak. They also guide the permanent adult teeth into position, so it is important to take care of your child's teeth right from the start."

When to start check-ups. "It is recommended that children have regular dental check-ups, starting when their first tooth appears or by 1 year of age." These "should be done by a dentist or other dental practitioner", though "other mouth checks can also be done by a trained non-dental professional such as a maternal and child health nurse, general practitioner, or Aboriginal Health Practitioner". And after that: "Make sure children of all ages continue to have dental check-ups. Ask your dentist or other dental practitioner how often your child needs a dental check-up."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Tooth decay - young children, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 February 2026). Accessed 6 November 2026.

The feeding and cleaning rules, with ages attached

Children's dental advice is more useful when the age bands are explicit. The published guidance gives them, and several items are specific enough to act on tonight.

The feeding rules. "Don't put baby to bed with a bottle"; "Never put sweet drinks in a baby's bottle"; "Never dip dummies in sweet substances, such as honey, jam or sugar"; "Start teaching your child to drink from a feeding cup from about six months of age. By around 12 months, they should be drinking only from a cup"; "Children can start to eat solid foods from around six months of age"; "For children over 12 months, fluoridated tap water is the best drink for oral health. Plain full-fat milk is also a healthy drink choice. Children can drink low-fat milk from two years of age"; "Fruit juice is not necessary or recommended for children because of its high sugar content and acidity, both of which can cause tooth decay"; "Ask for sugar-free medicines if possible."

Two of those are worth repeating. Fruit juice is "not necessary or recommended" — the Department's own words, and for two reasons, sugar and acid. And asking for sugar-free medicines is the kind of thing nobody thinks of.

Why the bottle at bedtime is singled out. "Evidence suggests that a more severe type of early childhood tooth decay (called early childhood caries) can occur if babies and infants are put to bed with a bottle of

breastmilk, milk, infant formula or sweet drink. As the baby sleeps, milk can pool in the mouth and the lactose sugar in the milk feeds the bacteria that cause decay. Saliva flow is low during sleep, so does not protect against damage. The upper four front baby teeth are most commonly affected."

The upper four front teeth. That is where to look.

On grazing, which is the rule most often broken. "When it comes to teeth, it's best to not eat too often. Avoid constant grazing throughout the day. Periods of not eating give the surface of the teeth more rest from acid attacks that occur after eating."

Periods of not eating. The Department's general decay advice says the same: "The more frequently you eat or drink sugary things, the more often the bacteria produce acid."

The cleaning rules, by age. "Start to clean your baby's teeth as soon as the first tooth comes through. Use a wet cloth or a small children's toothbrush with water"; "From 18 months to five years of age, use a small pea-sized amount of children's low-fluoride toothpaste on a small toothbrush with soft bristles"; "At six years of age children can use a pea-sized amount of standard fluoride toothpaste"; "If you live in an area that does not have fluoride in the drinking water, ask your dental practitioner about the right toothpaste for your child"; "Brush teeth and along the gum line twice a day; in the morning and at night before bed."

Technique and timing, from the Department's toothbrushing guidance. Brush "the teeth and along the gum line to clean every tooth thoroughly (about two minutes is a good guide)", "gently in small circles", on "the inside surfaces and the outside surfaces of teeth", and "back and forth on the chewing surfaces". Afterwards: "ask your child to spit out the toothpaste, and not to rinse with water. The small amount of toothpaste remaining keeps protecting teeth."

Who holds the brush, and until when. "Young children are not able to brush their own teeth well enough so they need an adult to do it for them." Hand over gradually — "at around age two or three, help them develop the skill by letting them have a go first before you follow up to make sure all surfaces have been cleaned" — and keep helping "until they can do it well enough by themselves (usually about eight years old)".

On electric brushes. "A children's electric toothbrush is a good alternative for some children aged over three years", with the sequence "guide the brush to your child's teeth first, then switch it on", and "do not press too hard or scrub, let the brush do the work".

And on flavour, since this is often the sticking point. "Fruit-flavoured toothpastes have become popular in recent years. Non-mint flavours are fine but always make sure toothpaste contains fluoride as this is the key ingredient that protects teeth against decay."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Tooth decay - young children, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 February 2026); Toothbrushing - children 0-6 years, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 4 August 2026); Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Can I use toothpaste on my baby's teeth?

For babies up to around 18 months, we suggest brushing with an infant toothbrush and water only, with no toothpaste. After that, a small, pea-sized amount of low-fluoride children's toothpaste is usually recommended. Your dentist can advise what suits your child.

At what age can my child brush alone?

Most children develop the dexterity to brush well on their own at around age 7. Until then, they usually need you to guide or finish the brushing. Checking their teeth afterwards is a good habit, especially for the back teeth.

Why are baby teeth important if they fall out anyway?

Baby teeth help guide the adult teeth growing underneath into the right place. Decay can lead to early loss of baby teeth, which may affect how the adult teeth come through. Looking after baby teeth also builds good habits for life.

Are fissure sealants suitable for my child?

Sealants can help protect the grooves on the chewing surfaces of teeth. Your dentist or dental therapist will decide whether they suit your child after an examination, and explain how they are applied and how long they may last.

What should I do if my child's tooth is knocked out or they have a toothache?

Call us on 13 13 16 as soon as possible. For a knocked-out tooth, hold it by the crown, keep it moist and avoid touching the root. Call 000 for serious injury or breathing difficulty.

What does early tooth decay look like in a young child?

The Victorian Department of Health describes three stages. First, "a dull white band on the tooth surface closest to the gum line - this is the first sign of decay and is hard for parents to spot". Then "a yellow, brown or black band on the tooth surface closest to the gum line". Then "teeth that look like brownish-black stumps this is advanced decay."

Can early decay in a child be reversed?

At the earliest stage, yes. "In the very early stages, early childhood decay can be reversed with advice and possibly treatment by a dentist or other dental practitioner." But "in most cases early childhood decay is not picked up until the later, more serious stages. At this time it cannot be reversed and the child may need major dental treatment."

Why are baby teeth more at risk?

"The enamel (hard outer layer) of baby teeth is much thinner and softer, putting them at greater risk of decay." The Department adds: "The good news is that tooth decay is largely preventable."

Do baby teeth matter if they fall out anyway?

Yes. "Baby teeth help children to eat and speak. They also guide the permanent adult teeth into position, so it is important to take care of your child's teeth right from the start."

Why is a bottle at bedtime such a problem?

"As the baby sleeps, milk can pool in the mouth and the lactose sugar in the milk feeds the bacteria that cause decay. Saliva flow is low during sleep, so does not protect against damage. The upper four front baby teeth are most commonly affected."

Is fruit juice alright for children?

The Department says not: "Fruit juice is not necessary or recommended for children because of its high sugar content and acidity, both of which can cause tooth decay."

What should children drink?

"For children over 12 months, fluoridated tap water is the best drink for oral health. Plain full-fat milk is also a healthy drink choice. Children can drink low-fat milk from two years of age."

Does constant snacking matter?

It is one of the Department's own points: "When it comes to teeth, it's best to not eat too often. Avoid constant grazing throughout the day. Periods of not eating give the surface of the teeth more rest from acid attacks that occur after eating."

How much toothpaste should my child use, and from what age?

"Start to clean your baby's teeth as soon as the first tooth comes through. Use a wet cloth or a small children's toothbrush with water." Then "from 18 months to five years of age, use a small pea-sized amount of children's low-fluoride toothpaste on a small toothbrush with soft bristles", and "at six years of age children can use a pea-sized amount of standard fluoride toothpaste".

Should my child rinse after brushing?

No. "Ask your child to spit out the toothpaste, and not to rinse with water. The small amount of toothpaste remaining keeps protecting teeth."

How long should brushing take, and when?

"Brush teeth and along the gum line twice a day; in the morning and at night before bed", with "about two minutes is a good guide" for cleaning every tooth thoroughly.

Until what age should I brush for my child?

"Young children are not able to brush their own teeth well enough so they need an adult to do it for them", with a handover starting "at around age two or three" and continuing "until they can do it well enough by themselves (usually about eight years old)".

When should my child's first check-up be?

"It is recommended that children have regular dental check-ups, starting when their first tooth appears or by 1 year of age." After that, "ask your dentist or other dental practitioner how often your child needs a dental check-up".

Is there anything else to ask about?

Sugar-free medicines. It is on the Department's own prevention list: "Ask for sugar-free medicines if possible."

Related services and further reading

Children's dentistry
Why we have specialist paediatric dentists
Paediatric dentistry
5 tips to help with dental anxiety in children
Children's braces and Invisalign
What does a hygiene appointment involve?
How long do dental sealants last?
Using fluoride toothpaste
Child dental benefits and bulk billing

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

HICAPS on-site claiming, and bulk billing for eligible children under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What age should children start brushing with toothpaste?

Core Dental suggests brushing with an infant toothbrush and water until around 18 months. From around 18 months to 5 years a small, pea-sized amount of low-fluoride children's toothpaste is usually advised. Our dentists can confirm what suits your child.

How should parents clean a baby's gums before teeth appear?

Core Dental suggests running a clean, damp cloth over your baby's gums after each feed. This helps clear away bacteria. When teething starts, you can move to an infant toothbrush and water.

Can children brush their own teeth?

Most children do not have the dexterity to brush well on their own until around age 7. Our team at Core Dental suggests guiding your child's hand, then checking and finishing the brushing, especially at the back teeth.

Why is it unwise to let a child sleep with a bottle of milk or juice?

Sugars in juice, breast milk and formula can stay on teeth for long periods overnight, which raises the risk of decay. Core Dental suggests water only in a bottle at bedtime and speaking with us about any concerns.

When should a child have a first dental visit at Core Dental?

Many practitioners suggest visits from around a child's first birthday. Core Dental welcomes children from age 2, and you can call 13 13 16 to discuss a younger child. Check-ups are usually suggested about twice a year.

Does Core Dental bulk bill children's dental check-ups?

Core Dental bulk bills for eligible children under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule, which covers ages 2 to 17. Eligibility is set by Services Australia, so please ask our team when you book on 13 13 16.

What can a dentist do to help prevent decay in children?

At Core Dental our team can teach brushing and prevention, check for cavities and developmental issues, and may suggest fissure sealants or protective pastes for your child where suitable after an examination.

How do I book a children's appointment at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au. We are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings across our nine clinics in Melbourne.