

Delayed First Visit to Dentist Can Affect Children's Lifelong Oral Health

Caregivers don't clearly understand the importance of primary teeth

Most American children don't see their family dentist until they are well over two years old—far later than is recommended by both dental and medical professionals.

That's one of the key findings from a survey of American children's oral health conducted on behalf of Delta Dental Plans Association, the nation's leading dental benefits provider. Delta Dental commissioned the survey to build greater knowledge about the state of children's oral health.

The survey of primary caregivers revealed that, for those children who had seen a dentist (and 34 percent had not), the average age at the initial visit was 2.6 years. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recommends that a child go to the dentist by age one, or within six months after the first tooth erupts.

Importance of Primary Teeth Not Recognized

Among children who have never visited the dentist or who have not seen a dentist in the last 12 months, the most mentioned reason (62 percent) was that "the child is too young" or "doesn't have enough teeth yet." Lack of insurance coverage was cited by 12 percent of the caregivers.

According to the AAPD, it is very important to keep primary teeth in place until they are lost naturally. "Baby" teeth:

- Help children chew properly to maintain good nutrition.
- Are involved in speech development.



- Help save space for permanent teeth.
- Promote a healthy smile that helps children feel good about the way they look.

The American Academy of Family Physicians recommends that care for a child's gums should begin at birth. According to the Delta Dental survey, 35 percent of caregivers clean their baby's gums just a few times a week, or less.

Caregivers should gently wipe the baby's gums with a soft, wet cloth after each feeding. When primary teeth begin to appear, they should be cleaned with a soft, child-sized toothbrush and a pea-sized dab of children's toothpaste, twice a day.

"Many Americans don't understand how important their children's baby teeth are to lifelong oral health," Jed J. Jacobson, DDS, MS, MPH; Chief Science Officer and Senior V.P. at Delta Dental of Michigan. "There's a continuing need for more education to encourage habits that will ensure lifelong oral health. And, since people overwhelmingly prefer the dentist as their primary oral health information source, dental benefits that encourage visits to the dentist are crucial."

Northeast Delta Dental

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