PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY: CARING FOR PRIMARY TEETH – THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY ORAL HEALTH AND GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

https://doi.org/10.56238/rcsv6n2-008

Submitted on: 12/10/2021 **Approved on**: 01/10/2022

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ABSTRACT

Primary teeth, often referred to as baby teeth, play an essential role in children's overall health, growth, and development. Despite their temporary nature, they are crucial for proper chewing, speech development, and guiding the eruption of permanent teeth. Neglecting their care can lead to dental caries, premature tooth loss, malocclusion, and long-term oral health issues. This article highlights the importance of caring for primary teeth and provides evidence-based recommendations for parents and caregivers. Preventive measures such as early oral hygiene with fluoride toothpaste, dietary control, and regular dental visits are fundamental to reducing the risk of early childhood caries. Additionally, awareness of harmful habits, such as prolonged thumb-sucking or pacifier use, is vital to preventing malocclusion. By establishing positive oral health habits early, families not only protect children's teeth but also contribute to their overall well-being, self-esteem, and quality of life.

Keywords: Pediatric Dentistry. Primary Teeth. Oral Health. Early Childhood Caries. Preventive Care. Fluoride. Caregivers. Dental Development.

INTRODUCTION

Primary teeth, commonly known as “baby teeth,” play a crucial role in the growth and development of children. Although temporary, these teeth are fundamental for proper nutrition, speech development, and guiding the eruption of permanent teeth. Neglecting primary teeth can result in pain, infection, malocclusion, and even long-term oral health complications. Therefore, pediatric dentistry emphasizes the importance of preventive care, parental education, and early interventions to ensure a healthy oral environment during childhood.

One of the main reasons to care for primary teeth is their essential function in maintaining arch space and guiding the eruption of permanent dentition. Untreated dental caries in primary teeth may cause premature loss, which disrupts occlusal development and increases the likelihood of orthodontic complications (American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, 2022). Moreover, severe caries can negatively affect a child’s quality of life, leading to difficulties in eating, sleeping, and concentrating in school (Martins-Júnior, Vieira-Andrade & Marques, 2013).

Early childhood caries remains a significant public health concern worldwide. The World Health Organization has highlighted that poor oral hygiene, frequent sugar intake, and lack of access to dental care contribute to its high prevalence. Preventive strategies are most effective when initiated during infancy, including proper cleaning of the gums and teeth as soon as they erupt, avoiding prolonged bottle feeding with sugary liquids, and discouraging frequent consumption of snacks high in fermentable carbohydrates (WHO, 2017).

Parents and caregivers play a central role in ensuring oral health. Daily toothbrushing with fluoride toothpaste, beginning at the eruption of the first tooth, is a cornerstone of prevention. The American Dental Association recommends that children younger than three years use a smear of toothpaste the size of a grain of rice, while children between three and six years should use a pea-sized amount (American Dental Association, 2014). Supervision by parents is crucial to ensure effective plaque removal and safe use of fluoride.

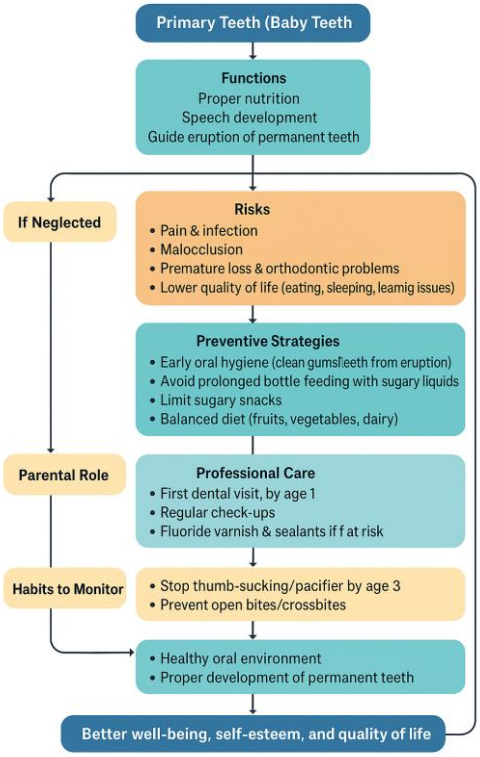
Regular dental visits are another essential aspect of pediatric oral care. The first dental appointment is recommended within six months of eruption of the first tooth, and no later than the child’s first birthday (AAPD, 2022). Early dental visits allow professionals to monitor oral development, provide anticipatory guidance, and identify risk factors for disease. In addition, professional applications of fluoride varnish and sealants can be used as preventive measures for children at higher risk.

Caregivers should also be attentive to habits that may influence dental development. Prolonged thumb-sucking or pacifier use can lead to open bites or crossbites if not addressed early. Pediatric dentists often advise gradual elimination of these habits by the age of three to minimize the risk of malocclusion (Peres et al., 2015). Nutrition plays a pivotal role as well: a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and dairy products supports enamel health and reduces cariogenic challenges.

The flowchart illustrates the importance of primary teeth in children and the comprehensive approach required for their care. It begins by highlighting the key functions of baby teeth, such as nutrition, speech, and guiding permanent dentition, and then shows the risks of neglect, including pain, infection, malocclusion, and reduced quality of life. Preventive strategies—like early oral hygiene, limiting sugary foods, and maintaining a balanced diet—are emphasized alongside the parental role of supervised brushing with fluoride toothpaste. Professional care, including early dental visits and preventive treatments, is also central. Finally, the chart addresses habits to monitor, such as thumb-sucking, and concludes with the desired outcomes: a healthy oral environment, proper development of permanent teeth, and improved overall well-being and self-esteem.

Figure 1

Importance of Primary Teeth Care in Childhood



Source: Created by author.

In conclusion, the care of primary teeth is a vital part of pediatric health and should never be underestimated. Beyond their immediate function in chewing and speaking, primary teeth preserve oral structures necessary for the correct alignment and health of permanent dentition. Parents and caregivers must adopt preventive strategies such as early oral hygiene, dietary control, supervised toothbrushing with fluoride, and timely dental visits. By instilling healthy habits early, families contribute not only to the child's oral health but also to their overall well-being, self-esteem, and quality of life.

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