**Is Your Child Ready for School ... With a Healthy Smile?**

*By Nilsa Toledo-de-Viera, DMD, FAAPD*

Did you know that in the U.S., 52 million school hours are lost each year because of dental diseases? Did you know that dental caries is the most common childhood disease nationwide, more so than the common cold and 5 times more prevalent than bronchial asthma?

Have you checked your child’s teeth for signs of decay? Dental caries in childhood is a silent disease, of which parents are many times unaware. Baby teeth can and will get caries if good oral hygiene practices are not in place; feeding habits also contribute.

How old do you think a child has to be to get dental caries? Did you know that by the time a child starts day care or pre-K at ages 2 or 3 he/she can already be suffering from dental rampant decay? By age 4 your child may have generalized oral infection and childhood caries in at least 8 to 10 of the 20 baby teeth!

Baby teeth have a definite function in chewing, adequate nutrition, in keeping the space for the permanent teeth, in speech and overall quality of life and self-esteem. Did you know that the baby back teeth or primary molars may be in the child's mouth until age 10 or 11? Maybe your child is suffering dental pain and unable to pay attention in class or perform as expected and poor grades are being attributed to other factors, not to poor oral health!

The Surgeon's General Report on Oral Health in America stresses on the serious public health problem that caries and oral disease pose to our children’s performance in school. In the U.S., more than 40% of children have caries by the time they reach kindergarten. Is your child one of these statistics?

Childhood caries is a serious infectious disease and is readily transmitted. Often times caries-producing bacteria are transmitted through saliva from caregiver to child. Caries in baby teeth can affect children's growth, cause significant pain and potentially lead to life-threatening infections that diminish overall quality of life!

Dental caries are completely PREVENTABLE. But how can you get a head start in childhood caries prevention? How can you make your child school-ready with a healthy smile?

Here are four simple tips to follow to prevent childhood caries:

1. **Start good nutritional habits from birth:** Never put your child to sleep with a bottle! Milk, juice, soda, sweetened drinks or chocolate milk will feed the germs/bacteria that are always present in the mouth to produce acid that in turn will destroy and demineralize the tooth enamel. This will result in a cavity/carious lesion. At younger ages give a bottle of plain water after the last feeding. The same tips hold for breast feeding; give a bottle of plain water after the last feeding.

2. **Brush teeth at least twice a day:** at bedtime and after breakfast in the morning and avoid sweets, candy and sweetened drinks as snacks in between meals. After lunch in school, chewing sugarless gum has been shown to be an effective measure in the reduction of dental caries in school children.

3. **Regular check-ups:** Check your kid’s mouth – You can do it yourself regularly, then have a pediatric dentist do a professional evaluation and cleaning and fluoride application every 6 months. The first dental check-up should be done by your kid's first birthday, or any time before if you see anything abnormal like bumps or patches, red/purple or white/yellowish lesions, swellings or hard tissue growths, all have to be checked by the pediatric dentist as soon as they appear!

4. **Fluoride rinses:** Sodium Fluorides can be used daily to prevent dental caries. Professional Fluoride applications by the pediatric dentist are recommended every 6 months. The pediatric dentist will indicate the need for Fluoride supplementation in your community and will prescribe it if necessary. Do not give Fluoride supplementation to your child unless it has been prescribed by the pediatric dentist.

Remember: get a HEAD START on the PREVENTION OF CHILDHOOD CARIES. Teach your child these simple oral health practices to adopt and maintain good oral health practices and be ready for school and for the rest of his life with a HEALTHY SMILE!

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