



A Visit by a Pediatric Dentist

Oral

by Dr. Leonard B. Smith

Oral health is integral to general health. So says the surgeon general's report on *Oral Health in America*, and as a practicing pediatric dentist for 33 years, I agree.

Oral health is much more than healthy teeth. It involves the health of all of the bones of the jaws and the soft tissues of the mouth—the throat, roof of the mouth, soft palate, tongue, salivary glands, gums, lips, nerves, and blood vessels. These tissues work together to allow us to speak, eat, taste, swallow, smile or frown, and kiss, as well as to provide protection against bacteria, viruses, and fungi infections.

Did you know that dental decay is the single most common chronic childhood disease? It is five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever. Fifty-one million school hours in the United States are lost each year to dental-related illness. Pain and suffering due to untreated diseases can lead to problems in eating, speaking, and attending to learning.

The mouth is the gateway to the rest of the body.

A baby's smile starts before birth

Starting with the front teeth, or incisors, babies' teeth begin to develop about the seventh week of pregnancy. The second primary (baby) molars begin to develop around the 10th week of pregnancy. A mother's proper prenatal nutrition promotes the development of a healthy baby. That includes the formation of healthy teeth and soft tissues of the mouth.

Newborn to age 6

Primary (baby) teeth play a significant role in your child's overall development:

- * They allow your child to bite and chew the food needed for healthy growth and development.
- * They help hold the lips in the right position to develop a pleasant smile.
- * They provide the necessary tools for speech and articulation development.
- * They act as a guide and preserve the space that the child has inherited for the permanent teeth.

The space that a child is born with to accommodate the 20 primary teeth does not increase to accommodate the 20 permanent teeth that will replace them. Good spacing of primary teeth is a positive sign that there will be adequate room for the permanent teeth. Little or no spacing between the primary teeth is an indication that dental crowding will be a problem in the future. The first primary teeth begin to fall out at 6 years of age and the last ones at 13 years of age.