



Guest Column

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February is Children's Dental Health Month

Children's Dental Health Month in February is a great time to focus on the fact that kids' dental health is just as important as their overall health. With all of parents' to-do's, oral health care is oftentimes last on their lists. Establishing routine oral health habits early on is the first step to setting the foundation for a lifetime of good oral health.

Tooth decay is preventable, and yet, the U.S. Surgeon General has identified it as the most common chronic childhood disease. Untreated tooth decay may cause discomfort for children, affect their ability to eat and speak, and lead to future oral and overall health problems. Poor oral health has also been shown to impact children's ability to focus in school, contributing to more absences and lower grades.

Good dental habits are essential for preventing tooth decay. In addition to brushing their teeth twice a day and flossing once a day, we recommend all children see the dentist by age 1 to allow the child and parent to establish a relationship with a dentist. This can help set the foundation for regular dental visits and help encourage healthy habits.

According to the 2017 Delta Dental of Illinois Children's Oral Health Survey¹, Illinois parents admit that when it comes to following recommended guidelines for oral health care, their kids are falling behind. Nearly three-fourths (74 percent) of parents indicate their children don't floss their teeth once a day and more than a third (36 percent) don't brush their teeth twice a day. Until age 6, parents should brush and floss their children's teeth. Older children may also need supervision to ensure they are cleaning their teeth properly.

There are great benefits for those who have a good oral health care routine. Children whose teeth are brushed at least twice a day are more likely to be successful, outgoing and proud of themselves.¹ Since Illinois parents say brushing and flossing are two of the most difficult things to get their children to do,¹ here are some tips for making tooth brushing and flossing fun.

- **Read fun books about dental care.** Reading books and brushing your teeth are both a part of many families' bedtime routines. Read fun books about oral health habits to reinforce why it's important for kids to take good care of their teeth at bedtime and in the morning. Children may relate better to a book character than a parent.
- **Make a chart to reward kids.** Let your kids decorate a chart with drawings that represent good oral health habits. Give your kids a sticker every day they brush twice for two minutes each time and floss once daily. Once the chart is full, you can reward them with a small prize.
- **Use fun oral health tools.** Let your kids pick out a fun-flavored toothpaste or a toothbrush with flashing lights or a timer. A toothbrush with their favorite cartoon character might get them more excited about brushing. Be sure to choose a toothbrush with soft bristles.

- **Play a game to teach kids about healthy foods.** Eating the right foods is not only important for overall health, but also for healthy teeth. Cut photos of different foods out of a magazine or find and print them from the internet. Have children place the photos on a poster with two columns: a tooth with a smile for healthy foods and a tooth with a frown for foods that may contribute to decay. Let your kids work with you to choose tooth-healthy foods for your family.
- **Provide rewards for older kids.** Kids of all ages need to have good oral hygiene habits. Give older kids incentives for choosing healthy foods and brushing and flossing regularly. For every month of good oral health care, let them choose an activity they will enjoy.

For more tips on how to make oral health fun for the entire family, visit Delta Dental of Illinois' oral health site, YourOralHealthHub.com.

¹*Kelton, a leading global insights firm, conducted the 2017 Delta Dental of Illinois Children's Oral Health Survey. Interviews were conducted statewide via email with 155 Illinois residents 18+. For results based on the total sample of Illinois adults, the margin of error is +/- 7.9% at a 95 percent confidence level.*