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BRUSH & GUM  
MASSAGER, \$9  
WITH TOOTHPASTE,  
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specifically prescribed by a dentist. Fluoride mouth rinses are only suitable for children who are over age six and at high risk for tooth decay.

Simply brushing kids' teeth twice a day may no longer be enough, say dental health experts. Parents must look at their children's behaviours, including how often they eat and the kinds of food and beverages they consume.

#### THE PARENTING CONNECTION

"Parenting patterns have changed over the past generation," says Calgary paediatric dentist Sarah Hulland. "Kids are eating and drinking frequently and it's not generally water – it's milk or juice." She says this "constant snacking" is having disastrous effects.

After watching her kids sit through numerous cavity fillings and two root canals over the past decade, Jeni Marinucci added midday brushing and a fluoride rinse to her two kids' oral health regimen. She also mandated a snack overhaul. Sofia, 13, and Nicolas, seven, now snack on veggies between meals instead of chewy dried fruit bars and trail mix with chocolate pieces, and sip on water instead of juice.

Though Marinucci jokes that the \$3,000 she's spent on dental care has paid for her dentist to put in a new pool, the reality is that her kids' dental woes – especially the cavities when they were little – rattled her confidence. "It's funny how closely we attach our feelings of success in parenting to our kids' physicality, especially their teeth," she says.

Our culture places a lot of value on straight white teeth and a perfect smile, so if a child has fillings at age four it can

make mom and dad feel like failures. While parents shouldn't blame themselves, they need to understand the connection between all oral habits – sipping, snacking and brushing – and dental health.

"The parameters of behaviour you instil early on make a huge difference for children," says Hulland.

April is Oral Health Month, dedicated to educating Canadians about the importance of good oral hygiene and its connection to overall wellness. With that in mind, here's a breakdown of oral care for every stage in childhood.

#### BABIES (0-1)

"At this young age it's about forming habits," says Mary Bertone, a board member for the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. Bertone also educates parenting groups through her work with the Centre for Community Oral Health at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Wipe down your baby's mouth with a soft cloth several times a day after feeding, she says. Once the first tooth erupts, clean it twice a day with a finger brush. There's no need for toothpaste, just gently rub the bristles around any teeth.

The CDA encourages parents to book a baby's first dental visit within six months of the first tooth appearing, or by the first birthday. And never, ever send your baby to bed with a soother dipped in honey or with a bottle of milk – breastmilk, cow's milk and formula all contain sugars that will linger in the child's mouth. A bottle or sippy cup of water is OK.

#### TODDLERS (1-2)

All primary teeth come in during this stage so it's important parents brush them twice daily using an age-appropriate soft-bristle toothbrush. Brush in small circles on the tops of the teeth, in the molar grooves and along the gum line, including where the tongue rests. Use a rice-grain-sized amount of children's fluoride toothpaste only if your child has been deemed at risk for ECC. (Factors include genetic predisposition for tooth decay, still feeding on demand or consuming sugary snacks between meals.) This tiny amount of fluoride is too small to swallow, but it's enough

to stay on the teeth, says Bertone; if you're unsure, ask your dentist.

If your tot resists brushing, persevere. You can try listening to music or watching TV during brush time. Make a game of it by letting your child brush your teeth if she lets you brush hers. If that fails, it's OK to force her. "It won't cause them a lifetime of trauma," says Hulland. She compares it to changing a diaper. You wouldn't put your toddler to bed with a dirty diaper; not brushing is putting your child to bed with dirty teeth, she says.

#### PRESCHOOL (3-5)

At this age children can start brushing their teeth on their own, but they still need help. Use "checking for sugar bugs" as an excuse to assist with brushing thoroughly in the morning and before bed, says Bertone. If you haven't already started, start using fluoride toothpaste and up the amount to pea-sized if your child can spit well. Remember to regularly check the teeth along the gum line for white, chalky lines or discoloured areas that could indicate tooth decay.

"When all their teeth are in – and if their teeth are touching – introduce flossing," says Bertone. Parents will need to do the flossing; try a floss pick (also called flossers).

Finally, be mindful of kids' snacking: avoid sugary treats and sticky fruit skins and stick to water between meals.

#### SCHOOL AGE (6+)

Permanent teeth, including the six-year molars, begin coming through at this age and kids will expect visits from the Tooth Fairy (see right). "It's important to brush permanent teeth well when they start coming through," says Bertone. Parents still need to help kids brush and floss twice a day until they're about seven or eight and can manage the task themselves.

Twens usually consume more sweets and may not be as motivated to brush. Bertone suggests keeping them on track by appealing to their vanity. Explain that people don't like to look at fuzzy teeth or red gums, and that no one likes bad breath. An electric toothbrush or a timer can also help extend the amount of time kids spend brushing – the goal is two minutes, but most do it for less than 40 seconds, she says. ☐



#### FACTS

### THE TOOTH FAIRY

According to a recent survey by Visa Canada, 83 percent of Canadian children are visited by the Tooth Fairy. The survey revealed that most kids (87 percent) receive between \$1 and \$5 per tooth.

### SAFETY FIRST

If you're concerned about water fluoridation, fluoride toothpaste, and your child's fluoride levels, check the Canadian Dental Association's Fluoride FAQs on their website at [cda-adc.ca/en/oral\\_health/faqs\\_resources/faqs\\_fluoride\\_faqs.asp](http://cda-adc.ca/en/oral_health/faqs_resources/faqs_fluoride_faqs.asp).

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