

Did you know although tooth decay is preventable, approximately half of Queensland's children have experienced tooth decay by six years of age?

The bad news is tooth decay can lead to severe pain and even disfigurement in some children.

As parents and carers of young children, we want to make sure they stay healthy and happy. However, this is sometimes easier said than done. The fact is, learning 'healthy' behaviours can be a complex process.

Teaching and learning does not just occur in the classroom. Health messages taught through 'curriculum' are either complemented or contradicted by practices occurring elsewhere in a child care facility or in the home. The trick is to make sure messages are consistent in both settings.

## Why early childhood facilities (child care, kindergarten, preschool and pre-prep)?

We know behaviours developed during childhood are often with us for life. We also know in order to prevent tooth decay and gum disease, it is essential daily toothbrushing and healthy eating habits are established at an early age. In fact, most children have formed lifelong eating habits by school age. Since so many Australian children attend early childhood care prior to primary school, this setting is ideal for reinforcing good health habits and attitudes.

## Is there a program that can help?

The good news is, addressing oral health in early childhood has never been so easy! Thanks to Happy Teeth, educators, parents and carers are able to make learning about oral health fun.

Happy Teeth creates oral health promoting facilities by influencing three components of learning: the classroom, facility policies and routines, and parents/carers.

In addition to focusing on healthy food choices, daily toothbrushing and regular dental check-ups to prevent decay, this program contains helpful fact sheets for educators, useful information for parents/carers and a variety of songs, rhymes and activities that children will love.



# Why are teeth important?

So now you know about Happy Teeth, let's get on with the basics. You may like to ask yourself, other staff and parent/carers to reflect on these questions.

## Why are baby teeth important?

Deciduous teeth or 'baby teeth' are with us for much longer than just our 'baby years'. In fact, some of these teeth remain in the mouth until about 12 years of age. They have a very important role to play in:



- ensuring normal development of the jaw
- maintaining space for permanent teeth
- allowing children to eat nutritious, fibrous foods
- assisting the development of good speech, including the 's' sound
- helping to develop self esteem, and
- helping to develop good life-long oral hygiene habits.

## How does oral health affect digestion?

Some foods like yoghurt and soup don't require much chewing at all. Others, like steak or an apple, need to be 'chopped up' by our teeth. In order to help digestion, we need to make sure when food goes into our stomach, it has been chewed sufficiently. Chewing our food is a lot easier if we have strong, healthy teeth.

## What is tooth decay?

Put simply, tooth decay is holes in teeth caused by poor oral hygiene. When we have sweet drinks or food and forget to brush our teeth, we give bacteria a great opportunity to thrive. Providing foods and drinks high in sugar allows the bacteria in our mouths to produce acid. As bacteria, sugars and acid build up around our teeth, we begin to feel that furry film known as plaque. When plaque is left on our teeth for too long, the acids begin to break down the outside layer of the tooth (enamel). The more frequently we eat sugars, the more acid the bacteria produce and the more likely we are to get holes in our teeth.



## Now we know the nitty gritty about tooth decay, how can we prevent it in our children?

Tooth decay in 0-5 year olds can be prevented by:

- **Healthy eating**

Good nutrition is especially important for children because they require extra nutrients for growth, development and strong teeth. Not only is a well nourished body essential for physical and emotional health but it also contributes to high self esteem, self confidence and readiness for learning. Now that is good news!

- **Healthy drinking**

Water is essential for good health. Fluoridated water also helps to guard teeth by strengthening, protecting and repairing tooth enamel.

- **Daily brushing of teeth**

Regular toothbrushing with fluoride toothpaste is the best way to prevent tooth decay and gum disease. It is important to develop the habit of toothbrushing as early as possible.

- **Regular dental check-ups**

Before the age of two years, children should have a dental check-up. Having regular dental check-ups means any problems can be picked up before they get out of hand. Plus, it is a great opportunity to get children used to positive dental checks and instruction on correct oral hygiene and diet.

## Why is toothbrushing so critical?

To have strong, healthy teeth for life, plaque needs to be removed daily to prevent tooth decay and gum disease. Toothbrushing is the best way to remove plaque. The fluoride in toothpaste also repairs and protects the tooth surface.

## Why is plaque so bad?

Plaque is a sticky invisible build-up of harmful bacteria, food particles and acid that forms every day on tooth surfaces. If left on the teeth, plaque causes the two most common dental diseases: tooth decay and gum disease.

## When should tooth care start?

Toothbrushing should start as soon as the first tooth appears. Since young children don't have the co-ordination needed to brush well, parents and carers need to clean children's teeth. Children will need adult supervision up until the age of eight years. However, as the child watches, they will learn to copy the cleaning actions. By eight years of age, the child should have developed sufficient toothbrushing skills to be able to brush without any help.