Ask the Experts

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Treating the Toothless Grin

Q

I have a six-month-old and a 19-month-old. I heard that you should “brush” a baby’s gums, even before their teeth come in. That seems harsh — is it true? When should I start letting my toddler take part in brushing? I’m afraid he will just swallow a lot of toothpaste.

A

Dental care should be something that is closely monitored from the time a child is born. The American Dental Association (ADA), American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend that a child visit a pediatric dentist by age one.

I wouldn’t recommend using a toothbrush to clean your infant’s gums, because the bristle may be too irritating. However, before teeth erupt you should clean your baby’s gums with a soft cloth. Additionally, your child may have sore or tender gums when teeth begin to erupt. For those instances gently rubbing their gums with a clean finger, a small cool spoon, or a moist gauze pad can be soothing.

For children younger than 3 years, caregivers should begin brushing their teeth as soon as they start to appear. Thoroughly brush twice per day (morning and night), or as directed by your dentist or physician, with fluoride toothpaste in an amount no bigger than the size of a grain of rice.

You may begin allowing your toddler to take part when they express an interest, or by turning it into a game. For example, play a song that is two minutes in length and ensure they are brushing the entire time. The AAPD recommends that parents / caregivers supervise and assist their children’s tooth brushing routine until they’re at least 8 years old.

Children 3 to 6 years of age should brush their teeth thoroughly twice per day using no more than a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste. Always supervise your child’s brushing to ensure that they use the appropriate amount of toothpaste, and try to get them to spit out most of the toothpaste when possible.