



# Is Your Child Ready to Learn at School?

**Tooth decay affects more children than any other chronic disease and affects their ability to learn and concentrate in school. Tooth decay occurs when bacteria found in the mouth convert sugar from foods or beverages into acid. These acids damage tooth enamel, the protective coating on the surface of the tooth. Tooth decay is an infection and can be painful if not treated. Children are not healthy and not ready for school if they have poor dental health. Make sure your child is ready for school and ready to learn.**

## **Baby Teeth – They’re Important**

Children need their baby teeth to eat properly, talk, smile, and feel good about themselves. Children with cavities may have difficulty eating, smiling, and paying attention and learning in school. If cavities are not treated, children can become sick enough to require emergency room treatment, and their adult teeth may be permanently damaged.

## **Student Dental Health**

Tooth decay (cavities) can be prevented by selecting healthy foods and brushing and flossing every day.

Help your children stay healthy.

- Choose healthy, well-balanced meals for the entire family; include healthy food choices for school lunches.
- Choose beverages for school lunches that are low in sugar and acid. Limit beverages that contain sugar including soda, juice and sports drinks.
- Remind children to floss every day. Parents should supervise their children’s flossing until they can handle the floss on their own. Many children cannot floss properly until about the age of 10.
- Involve children in the selection of the type of toothbrush, dental floss and fluoride toothpaste they use. The more involved children are, the more likely they are to form lasting oral health habits.
- Schedule regular dental checkups.
- Ask the dentist if your children would benefit from sealants, a plastic coating for the top of back teeth to help prevent decay.
- Around age 9 or 10, consult with a dentist or orthodontist about if or when your children might benefit from orthodontic care (braces).
- Make sure children drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste to help prevent tooth decay. Bottled or purified water may not have enough fluoride.

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## Good Snacking

It is important to establish good eating and snack habits when your children are young. Snacks can offer important vitamins and minerals. Careful selection of the snacks can play a role in healthy teeth. Some of the worst snacks are sugary or starchy snacks nibbled on for prolonged periods of time and drinks that contain sugar. These snacks and drinks give bacteria in plaque more opportunity to make acids that cause tooth decay. Encourage children to make healthy snack choices. Students can use the following snack guidelines to minimize the risk of dental disease.

- Choose nutritious foods such as fresh fruits, raw vegetables, whole grains, dairy products, meat, and nuts for between meal snacks. Slice up bananas, strawberries, and kiwi for a colorful and tasty snack.
- Choose sugary foods less often. When sweets are consumed, try to do so during meals. Saliva production increases during meals and helps neutralize acid production and rinse food particles from the mouth.
- Consider chewing sugarless gum after eating. Sugarless gum is another way of promoting saliva production.
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks. Water simply can't be beat for a healthy drink. It does an excellent job of rinsing the teeth, diluting the acids, and when fluoridated, can actually promote the growth and development of stronger teeth. It's also a good idea to drink fluoridated water with your snacks. (If you choose bottled water, check the label for fluoride content.)
- Be aware that snacks from school vending machines are mighty tempting. Check to see if your school is one of the many that now include healthier vending machine options.

## Mouthguards

Back to school means that many children are returning to sports activities. Children who are involved in sports that place the teeth at risk of injury should consider wearing a mouthguard. Mouthguards are an important and simple measure that can aid in the prevention of dental trauma.

- Teach children that mouthguards are priority equipment for participating in any sport that could result in a knocked-out or fractured tooth.
- Encourage children to wear mouthguards at a young age so they can get in the habit of protecting their teeth for a lifetime.
- Accidents happen not only during official games but also during informal play. It is equally important to wear their protective gear during practice and warm-ups.

Many things influence a child's progress and success in school, including dental health. Children must be healthy to learn, and children with tooth decay or mouth injuries may not have the attention span to concentrate on school work. For most individuals, tooth decay is almost entirely preventable. By providing proper instruction, monitoring, encouragement and a positive personal example, you can help your children develop and maintain a healthy attitude about the importance of oral health.

*Source:*  
American Dental Association: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)  
Academy of General Dentistry: [www.agd.org](http://www.agd.org)  
Centers for Disease Control: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)