

# Smilematters

## PATIENT FACT SHEET

### Dental Health Concerns for Infants and Toddlers

February is National Children's Dental Health Month, and we want to help your children develop a happy, healthy smile! Below is some valuable information all parents should know about caring for their baby's teeth.

#### **"Well Baby" Dental Exams**

If your child hasn't had a dental examination, schedule a "well baby checkup" for his teeth. The American Dental Association recommends that the first dental visit take place within six months of the appearance of the first tooth, and no later than the child's first birthday. Early childhood dental visits will allow your dentist to check the teeth for signs of decay and monitor progress and potential problems with emerging teeth. Your dentist can also make sure your child is receiving the proper amount of fluoride for healthy teeth. This visit will also give your child the opportunity to become comfortable with the dentist and dental visits.

#### **Making a Successful Transition from Baby Bottle to Cup**

As harmless as it may seem, allowing your child to drink from a baby bottle for too long can expose him or her to baby bottle tooth decay. From the time your child's first teeth appear, they need to be protected from frequent and prolonged exposure to liquids such as fruit juice, milk or formula, which all contain sugar.

Infants should finish their naptime or bedtime bottle before going to bed, as liquids can pool in the mouth and lead to decay when babies are allowed to fall asleep with a

bottle. Parents should encourage children to drink from a cup by their first birthday.

While training cups (also known as "sippy" cups) are a useful tool in helping children transition to the cup, they should only be used temporarily. "No spill" cups contain a valve that doesn't allow the child to sip.

Instead, they must suck on the cup like a baby bottle. This can defeat the purpose, as it prevents the child from learning to sip.

Toddlers should also not be allowed to carry the training cup around, as there is a risk of injury to the mouth if the child falls while walking and drinking at the same time.

Once the child has learned how to sip, the switch to a regular cup can be made.

#### **Pacifiers and Thumb Sucking**

Sucking is a natural reflex for babies and serves to help them learn about their world, feel secure, calm themselves, and help them fall asleep. Most children will stop thumb sucking or using a pacifier between the ages of 2 and 4. Once permanent teeth begin to emerge, sucking on a thumb or pacifier can cause problems with growth and alignment.

#### **Tooth-brushing for Toddlers**

Parents should clean baby's gums with gauze following all feedings. Once the first tooth has emerged, begin brushing your child's teeth and gums with a soft-bristled toothbrush and a little water. When your child is able to hold the toothbrush and tries to brush himself, supervise carefully and then brush again to make sure every surface has been brushed. As children learn how to brush, begin using a pea-sized amount of toothpaste and teach them to spit out the toothpaste, rinsing well with water.