

Mom's Guide to Dental Health & Hygiene

Reviewed by [John Gammichia](#), DMD, FAGD

Dental hygiene is not just for grown-ups. If children don't develop healthy dental habits when they are young, they probably won't be inclined to care for their teeth as adults. Even unhealthy baby teeth can cause problems for future permanent teeth. Oral care does not come naturally, but encouraging and modeling it in a child's early years can lay the foundation for a lifetime of healthy teeth and gums.

Studies are increasingly showing a link between tooth decay and general health problems. Dental decay is the most common disease in children, especially since they tend to [consume a lot of sugar](#) and may not have the dexterity (or the motivation!) to brush it all out of their teeth. [The Pew Center on the States](#) says that almost 60% of kids experience dental decay.

Promoting the oral health of your child may appear overwhelming, and it's no wonder when little Johnny keeps dropping his toothbrush in the toilet, and little Jessica brushes for a grand total of 4 seconds after multiple reminders. Despite all that, you're still going through tubes of Bubble Gum Princess toothpaste at an alarming rate (though the dog's breath has smelled awfully fresh lately).

That's why we compiled this guide. We hope to provide not only facts and figures, but also real advice straight from moms just like you who are working with their babies, toddlers, tweens and teens every day to promote their dental health. We've divided our guide into sections for each primary age throughout your child's development. Within each section you will find information, tips and advice to help you guide your child toward a healthy adulthood with a great smile.

Newborn – When there is only gum



[Photo](#) by Rachel Carter / [CC BY-ND](#)

Long before you felt your baby's first kick, his teeth were beginning to develop below his gums. The hard enamel had formed around each tooth by the third or fourth month in your womb. During the first few months of his life, you were probably too busy and exhausted to think much about what would soon be happening in his mouth. Nevertheless, there probably came a day when you noticed he was more cranky than usual. Perhaps he drooled excessively or constantly chewed on his hand, your finger or any other object he could find.

“I've always rubbed on my kids' gums or baby teeth with washcloths or rubber finger brushes since they were babies... Let your kids get used to you 'brushing' in their mouth by starting with washcloths and rubber toothbrushes when they're young. They won't be so averse to it when you do try to actually brush their teeth, because they will be used to it by then.”

-Renee, of [Om...and then some](#)

To find out how you can brush your child's teeth, check out this [video](#)

As with most other aspects of childhood development, each baby is different and operates on his own schedule. Some children, for instance, don't get their [first tooth](#) until they are 10 months old, while others proudly display one at 3 months. Generally, the bottom front teeth come in first,

followed by the top front teeth. Next are the molars and finally the cuspids, which are the pointed teeth. In all, there are 20 "primary" teeth—more commonly known as baby teeth. If they seem gapped and uneven, don't worry: Space between baby teeth allows room for 32 bigger permanent teeth to replace them later, which will come in during your child's early elementary school years when the baby teeth fall out.

Protecting your baby's teeth from decay starts as soon as his first tooth erupts through his gums. The upper front row is the most susceptible to problems, but any of his teeth are vulnerable. There are several things you can do to keep decay at bay and to begin making oral care fun for him. Here are some tried-and-true tips direct from moms who have been there, done that – some more than once!

- After each feeding, wipe your baby's gums with a clean gauze pad or washcloth. Once teeth appear, brush them daily with a soft-bristle toothbrush. Do not use toothpaste, because your baby doesn't know how to spit yet. Water is sufficient. Many moms recommend accustoming your baby to the toothbrush by allowing him to hold and play with it, as well as to chew on it. Any safe strategy you can find that makes the toothbrush fun—or at least tolerable—is worth a try.

“Kyra is only 14 months but has had teeth from 4 months. She was exclusively breastfed until 6 months, so we didn't really worry about her teeth at all, but when she started on solids, we realized we had to start. It was impossible to get a 6-month-old to 'brush' her teeth, so we just gave her the toothbrush to 'chew' on.”

-Luschka, of [Diary of a First Child](#)

- Maintain your own oral health. Like any other disease, [tooth decay is contagious](#). If you have a cavity or mouth infection, you can easily pass it on to your baby by sharing cups, straws, spoons or even from putting his pacifier in your mouth. Keep your own mouth healthy and don't share these items with your baby to minimize the chances of transmission.
- Your baby has a higher chance of tooth decay, otherwise known as nursing caries, if you supplement with formula or use it exclusively. This is because formula contains extra sugar in the form of lactose. To help prevent tooth decay from formula, don't give a bottle just before bed. Allowing some time between feeding and sleep allows your baby's saliva to clear the milk from his mouth.
- Don't dip your baby's pacifier in sugar or honey. Similarly, avoid sweet juices and candy, particularly right before sleep.
- Pacifiers and bottle nipples can contain bacteria that lead to tooth decay, so try to discourage their use. One way to start this process is to take them away as soon as the baby is in bed. If at all possible, stop bottle-feeding after your baby is a year old.

The Teething Toddler – Maintaining healthy new teeth and sanity



[Photo](#) by matt6234 / [CC BY-ND](#)

Ah, toddlerhood! That time of asserting independence and testing limits, of astounding learning and development in leaps and bounds. Whether it's dressing, eating or playing, your toddler is becoming her own person, and she wants things done her way.

How to Brush

- Squeeze a pea-sized amount of toothpaste onto a soft-bristled brush
- Scrub the teeth gently with small, circular movements
- Don't forget to brush the tongue!
- Brush for 2 minutes, or divide the mouth into smaller segments

How do you allow her to test her autonomy while still ensuring that she continues to develop the essential oral health habits that will protect her teeth for a lifetime?

By age 2 or 3, her last baby tooth will have arrived, with the exception of her 6-year molars. Brushing and flossing daily become vitally important at this age, especially since most children eat an abundance of [sugary foods](#). Here are some mom-tested strategies that can help you and your toddler incorporate oral health into your routine.

- Make brushing and flossing into a game. Sing a tooth-brushing song as you help your child brush her teeth. Need some ideas? [Find tooth-brushing songs here](#). Got any to add? Leave us a comment!

- She may want to do it herself, so don't discourage her motivation. Give her the brush and let her go to town. Now that you have validated her desires, she may be more willing to let you help. Let your toddler look in the mirror to see if there's anything "yucky" in her teeth.

"I brush her teeth twice a day, but that's about the extent of her dental care right now as she is only 17 months old. I let her hold the toothbrush after I brush her teeth so she can feel like she is doing it herself (she loves that!)."

–Mrs. Foreste, of [As the Forest\[e\] Grows](#)

- Get a toothbrush that plays a tune or flashes for the 2 minutes she should be brushing. For toddlers, 2 minutes can seem like an eternity, so any songs, games or gimmicks that you can come up with will help make brushing go faster. They even have apps that include these features.

"I had Parker pick out his own electric toothbrush - Thomas the Train. We use "Toy Story" toothpaste, which he loves. We all brush our teeth together at night and have lots of fun with it. We keep it positive. If a little extra encouragement is needed, we remind him that he gets a "smiley" on his chart for brushing his teeth. I think just always setting that example early on and modeling the behavior has helped the most... If anything is ever taken to bed or left in the room at night, it should only be water! Don't create any bad habits of juice or milk after teeth brushing... At the early age of 2, it really is mostly about us, as parents, fostering good habits and modeling the right behaviors."

–Kristy, of [Pampers and Pinot](#)

- Your local supermarket will have a wide variety of children's toothbrushes, some battery-operated, that can make brushing more interesting. You'll see a full range of characters from television and fairy tales on these toothbrushes, and this can be very motivating to some children.
- Brush your teeth while she brushes hers. Make it into a backward race in which the winner is the one who brushes for the longest.

"Be a good model! When you brush your teeth, bring your child(ren) into the bathroom with you, give him/her a toothbrush and toothpaste, and let them imitate you. Show them the proper movements, and allow them to play and explore brushing their teeth with the toothbrush. Allow your little one to pick out a toothbrush that has a favorite character on it, which will make it seem more like a game than a chore... In addition, we are big water-drinkers! We have not introduced juice or soda to her [16-month-old], only breast milk, water and now soymilk."

- Tana, of [Tiny Green Mom](#)

If your child doesn't yet understand the concept of spitting, turn it into a game. Give her a cup or bottle of water and go outside to explain the process. Then set up a target and see who can spit farther! Later, you can take turns aiming for the "target" in the sink – the drain. Once she has

mastered spitting water, you can begin to associate this new concept with spitting toothpaste into the sink after brushing. Be sure to explain that spitting is only appropriate in certain situations!

One of the questions most asked by parents is, “When should I take my child to the dentist for the first time?” According to recommendations by the [American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry](#), the [American Dental Association](#) and the [Academy of General Dentistry](#), the ideal time is when the child is 1 year old. This gives the dentist the opportunity to observe the development of your toddler’s mouth and to notice issues before they develop into major problems. If necessary, recommendations can be made about tooth care, thumb-sucking, pacifier use and diet. This also allows the child to become used to going to the dentist at an early age.

Another major parental concern is how to help a child overcome their [fear of going to the dentist](#). In many cases, your child’s hesitancy is directly related to your own fears of seeing the dentist. Projecting an air of matter-of-fact calm can be very important. Again, starting early may help prevent any fear, as well as speaking of dental checkups in a wholly positive light.

“From the time the kids' teeth come in, I make sure they get regular cleanings. In our experience, the first few visits to the dentist's office are devoted more to education than they are to actually cleaning. The kids get familiar with the equipment and get guidance and instruction from the dentist and/or his assistants, and it's a real learning experience. Then I can remind them to use those new skills when we brush their teeth at home.”

–Rita, of [Fighting off Frumpy](#)



[Photo](#) by John Pike / [CC BY-ND](#)

If you're still concerned that your child might find the dental office intimidating, you can also look for a [pediatric dentist](#). These dentists specialize in the care of children. Everything from the décor of the office to the terminology to the techniques they use-and even how the post-visit prizes are designed. These can all help your child's relaxation and can ease their mind.

Don't wait until problems arise to take your child to the dentist. Make your first few visits pleasant and not treatment-oriented. You will help your child see going to the dentist as positive or neutral at the very least. To further help your child, let her bring a favorite toy to distract her and don't hesitate to use appropriate rewards for a job well done. Consider talking to her in advance about what she would like as a reward for a good dental visit. Stickers, an outing or additional television time are just a few possibilities.

Perhaps most important, don't forget to schedule your next visit. No matter how crazy your life may become, visiting the dentist twice a year is one of the most important ways you can promote your child's health and well-being.

Baby Teeth – Cleaning the teeth they will lose



[Photo](#) by Amber Strocel / [CC BY-ND](#)

It's tempting to minimize the importance of oral care for kids who still have their baby teeth. After all, they will just fall out anyway, right?

This myth may be one of the reasons that tooth decay is taking on epidemic proportions in our country today. According to the Pew Center on the States, tooth decay among children aged 2-5 increased by 15% between 1994 and 2004. Even more ominously, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) report that tooth decay in children has risen by 20% in the past 8 years. The CDC also reports that only 48% of children entering kindergarten have seen a dentist within the past year.

“Tater Tot is pretty concerned about not having cavities, so he's pretty receptive to the whole dental health routine. Every now and then he'll balk at brushing his teeth, but then I just remind him that not brushing can lead to cavities, and he usually comes around.”

–Marian, of [Tater Tales](#)

Tooth decay is 7 times more common than hay fever and 5 times more common than asthma, according to the Academy of General Dentistry. We cover our coughs and wash our hands after using the restroom, but what about brushing and flossing our teeth? We typically don't even put them in the same category. Even if cavities occur in baby teeth that will soon fall out, they can have lifelong negative effects on the permanent teeth developing beneath the surface. For that reason, postponing dental care is rarely a good idea.

“My kids are 5, 3 and 1, so I've got to make it fun in order for them to sit still long enough to brush thoroughly. There's a song on one of their favorite shows that says something about "tiny ugly germs." I sing my own little song about cavities and plaque set to its tune, and the kids are so entranced with watching me act silly while they brush that they do a pretty good job! Also, their dentist gave them a little sand timer, and they like to brush until the sand runs out. Either way, a fun distraction makes for better brushing at our house... Make it an unchangeable part of your daily schedule. When it's always right before bed, or the last thing they do before leaving for school, it becomes a routine.”

–Rita, of [Fighting off Frumpy](#)

Having an established relationship with a dental practice can be vitally important. Accidents happen; children often fall and could knock out a tooth or otherwise injure their mouths. A hospital emergency room will only stabilize your child and give him something for the pain, with the recommendation that you make an appointment with a dentist as soon as possible. By contrast, if your child is already a patient at a pediatric practice, or other dental practice, you can usually access thorough [emergency dental](#) care on the same day.

Since children are prone to falling and other accidents, many moms wonder what to do if their child injures their teeth. While having your dentist's office on speed dial might ease your mind, rest assured that you can handle many emergencies on your own. Depending on the injury, you can do several things to alleviate your child's discomfort and optimize the chances for a good

prognosis. Keep this checklist on hand to determine if there's something you can do in the meantime:

- If a *baby tooth* (that's not already loose) is completely knocked out from the socket, control the bleeding with firm pressure. Give over-the-counter pain medication if needed. Depending on the age of your child, give your dentist a quick call to see if the tooth should be replaced.
- If a tooth is hit but doesn't come out and the injured tooth has turned gray or brown, it probably will not require treatment. However, it is more susceptible to infection, even 6 months to a year after the injury. If you begin to see a pimple on the gum above the tooth, it's a sign that an infection is starting. In this case, call your dentist and explain what's happening. Make an appointment for X-rays and give over-the-counter pain medications as needed.
- If your child's tooth has been hit but is not loose, there might be discoloration or bleeding along the gum line and soreness for 1-3 days. This injury should heal nicely without a trip to the dentist. Give over-the-counter pain medication as needed and contact the dentist if it doesn't get better after a few days.
- If his tooth is hit and loose, it may wiggle back and forth but remain in the proper position. There is often discoloration and bleeding along the gum line. Generally, the tooth will tighten back up within 1-2 weeks. Control bleeding with pressure from a cloth and give over-the-counter pain medication as needed. Minimize movement of the tooth and make sure your child can close his mouth properly. Avoid hard or crunchy food in the meantime to keep from knocking the tooth out of position while it heals.
- If the tooth is knocked out of position, you will notice bleeding and bruising of the gum as well as the fact that the tooth is misaligned. The tooth may or may not be loose. Immediately after the injury, try to gently and firmly return the tooth to its proper position with your fingers. Use pressure from a cloth to control bleeding and give over-the-counter medications as needed. Your child will feel pain for 1-2 weeks. Make an appointment with the dentist to determine if the root has been damaged.
- If his tooth is hit and broken, it will look chipped, and your child will feel sensitivity to heat and cold. Bleeding from the inside of the tooth is a sign that the tooth is fractured and the nerve is damaged. In these cases, prognosis for the tooth is poor. Limit your child's exposure to hot and cold food and drinks, offer a soft diet and treat with over-the-counter medications until you can receive an evaluation as soon as possible.
- If he has knocked out one of his *permanent teeth*, time is of the essence. You should see a dentist immediately, since he or she may be able to save the tooth and help you avoid costly dental work later. Locate the tooth and do not handle it unnecessarily, holding it by the crown not the root. Rinse the tooth and put it back in the socket, if possible. If you can't, put the tooth in milk or a wet cloth. If the tooth is fractured, bring the pieces to your dentist's office. If your child is old enough, have him carry the tooth in his mouth, since his saliva will help to protect it.

As a parent, you have many tools readily at your disposal that can help to alleviate your child's pain after a mouth injury: ice to reduce swelling, a clean cloth to apply pressure and plenty of TLC for emotional reassurance. But keep this tip in mind: If your child experiences uncontrolled or prolonged bleeding or discomfort, seek emergency services immediately.

Losing Teeth – Caring for teeth that are falling out



[Photo](#) by Heather Williams / [CC BY-ND](#)

Somewhere around the age of 6 or 7, your child will lose her first tooth, beginning a process in which all of her primary teeth loosen and fall out to make room for the permanent ones. Don't worry if she loses her first tooth a year or so earlier or later; this is normal. Most kids lose their teeth in the order in which they grew in: first their 2 lower front teeth, then their 2 upper front teeth, lateral incisors, first molars, canines and second molars. The prospect of losing teeth can be an exciting one for many children, but others can become nervous at the prospect. Whatever your child's reaction to this milestone, this is a great opportunity to reinforce the importance of excellent oral hygiene.

How to Floss

- Pull out 2 feet of floss & wrap the ends snugly around the pointer fingers
- Hold the floss taut with about 6 inches of floss between the fingers
- Press it between each tooth, scraping against the sides of the teeth
- Rinse and spit!

How can you help your child continue to care for her teeth properly, even when she may be losing them? Encourage her to continue brushing at least twice per day. If she is reluctant or noncompliant, some parents find that positive reinforcement helps. One idea is to make a weekly chart that is marked with a star or smiley sticker each time she successfully brushes and flosses.

Together, you can discuss a suitable reward to earn. Mark the loss of a tooth with money or a small surprise, particularly if your child is squeamish about the prospect.

“ At Halloween I would tell my kids they could have all the candy they wanted....as long as they brushed after every piece. Amazing how little candy they wanted after that rule.”

–Janet, of [The Empty Nest](#)

Limit eating and drinking between meals, especially sugary snacks. Cavities are caused when bacteria feed off the sugar and other nutrients in foods that remain in the mouth. That's why rinsing the mouth after snacking is a great idea. Remember that even breath mints and sugary gum that are kept in the mouth for a long period of time can lead to tooth decay. Maintain a regular schedule of dental appointments.

“I use the "count to 20" rule of thumb. I have them start on the upper left, count to 20, move to the lower left, count to 20, upper right, lower right, and then the important teeth that show in the front, count to 20. As a homeschool mom, a bonus to this method is that my kids could count to 20 before kindergarten. :) I have to admit that they have perfected the art of "speed counting" to get the job done more quickly... We're big on twice-yearly cleanings at the dentist. The dentist usually does a good job of telling them the importance of flossing and proper brushing to avoid the dreaded cavity. And a large man in a white lab coat comes closer to getting their attention than I would... They know that part of their morning chores is to brush after breakfast, and they must brush before bedtime. I make it a point to hover nearby so that I can threaten, er, um, I mean encourage them to get the job done right.”

–DeeDee, of [Fiddledeedee](#)

You can also ask the dentist about sealants and fluoride treatments, both of which can help prevent cavities. In general, sealants and topical fluoride treatments are considered excellent forms of preventive dental medicine. Dental sealants are made of a tooth-colored plastic material, which is painted onto the chewing surface of the back teeth. It hardens within seconds and seals out plaque and food to guard against cavities. Because the back teeth are more likely to suffer decay, the sealant is usually painted on the 6-year and 12-year molars. Another way to help protect the teeth is the topical administration of fluoride. Generally, these treatments are given annually to children under 14, and they help strengthen teeth by hardening the outer enamel.

What if your son or daughter has a disability? Does this have any bearing on oral health? Children and teens with special needs are more susceptible to tooth decay and other dental problems. In part, this is because physical and mental disabilities may make it more difficult for a [child with special needs](#) to maintain an effective oral health regimen. Furthermore, your special needs child may have physical abnormalities that contribute to gum disease and tooth decay. Some medications may even lead to dental health problems. For this reason, it is more important than ever that you ensure that your disabled child receive ongoing dental care throughout childhood and the teen years.

Permanent Teeth – Caring for teeth that will last



[Photo](#) by loveiswritten / [CC BY-ND](#)

Now that some or all of your child's permanent teeth have come in, maintaining their good health is vital. When treated properly, they can last a lifetime. In addition, healthy teeth are one of the best ways to make a positive first impression. As your child grows into young adulthood and becomes more focused on his or her appearance, this fact might become an important motivator. In many cases, you and your dentist may have already begun to discuss orthodontics. Should your child get braces? When? [How much will they cost?](#)

Precisely when your child should see a specialist about braces depends on the individual situation. However, according to the [American Association of Orthodontists](#), most children should see an orthodontist by the time they are 7 years old. This is because early intervention often makes treatment much easier. In some cases, an orthodontist can use a treatment strategy on a younger child that would be impossible on an older one whose jaw and facial growth has been completed. You don't need to wait until all of your child's permanent teeth have come in. These factors would make early orthodontic care particularly helpful:

- Problems biting or chewing
- Early or late tooth loss
- Late thumb-sucking
- Mouth breathing
- Crowded or misaligned teeth
- Jaws that make sounds or shift
- Bite problems
- Jaws that are too far forward or back

Contrary to popular opinion, braces are not just superfluous cosmetic interventions. Early and effective orthodontia can cure problems with biting, chewing and alignment that could otherwise plague your child throughout her life. In many cases, these interventions reduce the likelihood of chronic tooth decay and can actually promote your child's overall health throughout adulthood and her elder years. Pretty smiles are just a perk!

How to Use Mouthwash

- Look for an alcohol-free mouthwash
- Measure the recommended amount on the bottle and swish
- Make sure to swish in all areas of the mouth
- Spit after the allotted time, and only rinse if instructed on the bottle

What are the main types of braces your child might get? Silver or stainless steel archwires and brackets are the most commonly used type of braces. As treatment progresses, the wire thickness changes. If your child is allergic to the standard metal braces or just wants to make a bold statement, your orthodontist might recommend real gold braces. Less-flashy titanium braces are sometimes prescribed for people who cannot tolerate the standard metal ones. Another alternative is clear or white braces, which are made out of ceramic and are much less noticeable. If none of these treatments is acceptable, lingual braces can be placed behind the teeth so as to be less obtrusive. Generally, these are used more for adults.

As all parents know, orthodontia is an investment in every sense, not only in the good health of your child, but financially. Making generalizations about the price of braces is difficult, since many factors are involved.

Where you live, the extent of the treatment and the nature of your dental coverage all figure into the equation, but you can probably expect to pay at least \$3,000 and as much as \$10,000 in total. Fortunately, [orthodontists](#) understand that most families are unable to pay all at once and provide various financing options.

If you're going to make such a large investment, it's important to make sure you feel good about the orthodontist you choose. Start with friends and family, and be sure to ask your dentist whom he/she trusts the most. Having input from multiple sources, especially an oral health professional, can help you narrow down whether the orthodontist is really good or if someone just happened to have a good experience with a bad orthodontist. Ask people you know and trust about their orthodontists.

Be sure to get as many details as possible. Your dentist is also an excellent resource. Chances are your child's dentist probably refers patients to one or two specialists on a regular basis. Make sure your insurance company accepts the orthodontist you pick. Once you have found someone you like, be sure to ask if the orthodontist has received an orthodontic degree from an accredited institution. Contact the American Association of Orthodontists to do a credential check. Many orthodontists offer a free consultation. Take advantage of this, writing down your questions in advance. Remember, you will be working closely with this person for several years, so it is essential that you and your child have a good rapport with him or her.

While this process may seem time-consuming, it has its rewards. You and your child will end up in the care of someone you like and trust who answers your questions in a way you understand. Considering the investment you will be making, you'll be glad you took the time to make the right choice.

Teenagers – Encouraging healthy behavior in your teenager



[Photo](#) by Hector Alejandro / [CC BY](#)

And you thought the toddler years were bad! How do you continue to encourage your sometimes-child, sometimes-adult to maintain the good oral health habits you have tried to instill? Some answers are obvious: encourage regular brushing and flossing, continue to discourage snacking on sugary foods and don't let your teen's busy schedule get in the way of twice-yearly dental appointments. Beyond the obvious, there are some lesser-known factors that can impact your teen's dental well-being.

[Oral piercing](#) is often a contested topic between parent and teen. Whether you're a fan of tongue and lip piercing or not, the American Dental Association has conducted studies that found that wearing mouth jewelry even for a limited time can cause permanent gum deformities that could lead ultimately to tooth loss. The ongoing contact between the jewelry and your teen's gums has been found to lead to receding gums, chipped or broken teeth and nerve damage or inflammation at the site of the piercing. It could even lead to [periodontitis](#), a disease of the supporting structures in the mouth, which means that the inner layer of the gum and bone pulls away from the teeth, forming pockets and leading to loose or lost teeth.

Many teens are very active in sports, and moms often wonder about [mouth guards](#). Are they effective? How can I choose the right one for my teen? There is no doubt that the right mouth guard can protect athletes from painful and costly oral and facial injuries. The American Dental Association estimates that mouth guards prevent approximately 200,000 injuries each year in high school and college football alone. Unfortunately, obtaining the right mouth guard is not as easy as going to your local sporting goods store and spending a few dollars. For maximum effectiveness, you need to find one that is tasteless, odorless, tear resistant, comfortable, resilient and that causes minimal interference to speech and breathing. It also must fit properly and be of the correct thickness. Your child's dentist or a sports physician will be best able to prescribe and recommend a slightly more costly but effective custom-made model.

“My children are older and I still remind them to see a dentist every year and to be sure to floss...floss..floss! I also made sure they had dental insurance so they were more likely to take care of any problems.”

–Janet, of [The Empty Nest](#)

The issue of bad breath is disturbing to virtually anyone, but particularly to self-conscious teens who may be ultra-focused on the image they portray. Also known as [halitosis](#), bad breath can be caused by an array of things:

- Poor oral hygiene
- Gum disease
- Wearing braces
- Dry mouth
- Oral cancer
- Bacteria on the tongue

In addition, certain lifestyle choices can be the culprit. These include smoking and eating disorders. As difficult as it often can be, keeping the lines of communication between you and your teen open can help you get to the bottom of what is causing her bad breath. In more extreme cases such as eating disorders, your love, support and intervention will be of paramount importance. And, as unpleasant as your teen's halitosis may be, taking heed of it could enable you to save your child's life.

Finally, [wisdom teeth](#) often become an issue of concern for people in their late teens. Should they be removed? When? This is by no means a simple question and, as with most such inquiries, it is best to consult your teen's dentist. After all, he or she has access to the X-ray images showing your teen's particular teeth and jaw structure. In general, however, the conventional wisdom is that it is far easier to have these third molars removed when a person is young and healthy, before the impacted or malpositioned teeth have a chance to cause decay or problems with adjacent teeth. The decision is a financial one as well as a practical one. Ask yourself if you can afford the operation. Is your son or daughter in pain? Does your dentist strongly recommend surgery? Why?

Don't be afraid to ask questions until you are satisfied with the answers. If in doubt, get a second opinion.

A Healthy Start

[Before you even felt your baby move inside you](#), his teeth were beginning to form. From that point on, you have an important role in teaching him about excellent dental health. As overwhelming as it may seem at times, your care and conscientious attention from a young age will make a huge difference in your child's entire life. No longer is it assumed that older people will need dentures. The foundation of care that you and your child build today will, in all likelihood, enable him to have full use of his teeth for as long as he lives.

Teeth are an incredibly important asset, and if they are taken care of, they can last a lifetime. If you start developing healthy habits in your children now, they will already be on the right track to taking care of those important pearly whites.