How do I perform a first dental visit for an infant or toddler?

**Background**

The increasing prevalence of early childhood caries is a cause for concern. However, the small number of pediatric dental specialists across Canada means that clinicians working in general dental offices are also needed in the fight against this preventable disease. Parents often complain that they are unable to obtain appropriate care when they notice problems with their children’s teeth. All too often, dental offices decline to see children under 3 years of age. This message is usually conveyed to parents by the team member who answers the phone, who may be unaware of recent guidelines highlighting the need to educate the entire office team (not only the dentist) about including infants and toddlers in the population served by general dental offices. This article provides a few guidelines on providing a child’s first dental visit as part of everyday practice.

In November 2001 the Board of Governors of the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) adopted the following recommendation: “CDA encourages the assessment of infants, by the dentist, ... within 6 months of the eruption of the first tooth or by one year of age.” A survey of general dentists across western Canada has revealed that although most respondents were aware of the CDA recommendation, a substantial proportion did not see children under the age of 2 years. Among those who did not accept young children into their practices, almost half cited difficulties in managing the patients because of their age and potential behavioural challenges as their main concern. Interestingly, several dentists felt that nurses and physicians should play a role in preventing early childhood caries. However, it may be unrealistic to expect medical colleagues to become involved in managing this problem when many in the dental profession refuse to do so.

**Conducting a Child’s First Dental Visit**

The first dental visit consists of a great deal of “preamble,” a very short examination and some follow-up with the parent. Much of the preamble can be completed by the office staff working at the...
The child is then allowed to play while the dentist and parent discuss any issues that may have been raised by the examination. If the child has a healthy mouth, this discussion is usually limited to ways of keeping the mouth healthy. If dental caries were noted, the topic will be possible causes and methods of treatment.

If decay is found during the first dental visit, the parent may have strong feelings of guilt. The dental team must be sensitive to this possibility and should take pains to avoid a judgmental attitude; rather, the team should be supportive, by suggesting ways in which the parent can help to treat and prevent further disease. Similarly, during the initial interview, open-ended questions are preferred, for example, “How often do you brush your child’s teeth?” rather than “Are you brushing your child’s teeth?”

When any type of decalcification or decay is noted, the treatment options will range from application of fluoride to minor restorative treatment and referral for more extensive treatment; referral is also appropriate at any stage when the dentist feels uncomfortable providing the treatment that is required. It is especially important that any necessary treatment be started immediately; treatment should not be delayed until the child is able to cooperate.

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**References**


For more details on conducting a child’s first dental visit, please see the accompanying PowerPoint presentation at: www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/vol-75/issue-8/577.html.