

Why I Don't Take My Kids to the Dentist

My family was gathered on a blanket to watch fireworks when my four-year-old son's bottom lip began to quiver. "My tooth hurts," he cried, and he lost all interest in the booming and brilliant display. We left the festivities early and headed for the first dentist that would see him. He was in serious pain. I was shocked to learn my four-year-old had a severe cavity, and not just one - he had five! My dentist, however, was not surprised.

I thought I was a conscientious mother, because I took my son to the doctor for regular check-ups. We were a health-conscious family. We breastfed, rarely ate sweets, and didn't even drink much juice. How could my son suddenly get five cavities without complaining of pain!

One extraction and four fillings later, as I sat there feeling guilty, I learned I was not the only mother to have some wrong notions about children's teeth. I began to ask moms when they first took their child to the dentist, and I learned that we all needed a re-education - and that we all had some pretty silly reasons for not making that early appointment. Here's the responses I got from moms, and Dr. Kellogg's answers to their excuses.

Devi McHarry



My kids are too little to need to go to the dentist, they don't even have teeth.

Kids have teeth at birth. We've seen kids with infections from teeth that cannot be seen under the gum. We recommend a "knee to knee" parent-cradled approach to early dental care. We find that kids are often much less fearful when they become personally familiar with the dentist at a very early age, instead of hearing horror stories about the dentist from the other kids on the bus. A lot of times it's actually the parents that are afraid to bring their child to the dentist. It's like dog training, sometimes it's not the dog that need to be trained, it's the owner. If parents will come in with their child, we can check for problems, get the child on friendly terms with the dentist, and teach parents how to care for their kid's teeth.

I make them brush all the time.

Brushing is good, but I had two patients this week who brushed regularly but still had tooth decay. Both the child and the parents were unaware of it. Secondly, some issues are easier to take care of at early stages, like teeth that may need braces, or genetic defects that can be corrected. Brushing is a great thing, but it won't do it all. We see kids as young as seven showing signs of gum disease from tartar buildup, because children are brushing but not flossing. Finally, 90% of our kid patients get the front two teeth great, but miss the hard areas. We can help them learn better brushing skills.

I don't let my kids eat much sugar, so I don't think they're going to get cavities.

It's not just the quantity of sugar in a child's diet that can cause cavities, it's actually a combination of things. First, if parents have a lot of decay, kids can acquire the bacteria from their parents, from kissing or sharing food, etc. Second, you also have to take into account how long the sugar is in contact with your child's teeth. A child who drinks pop, chocolate milk, or even skim milk between meals throughout the day can do a lot more damage to their teeth than if they consume the same amount of sugar and brush immediately afterwards. Likewise, children who linger at the breast while nursing can keep lactose sugars in contact with the teeth for a long time. Third, parents are not always present to absolutely control their child's diet; for example at school, at a friend's house, or when visiting grandma. Finally, some foods like crackers and breads are starchy, sticky foods that break down into sugars on a child's teeth, even though they are not sweet foods.

I nursed my child. She isn't going to get bottle-mouth cavities.

Even breast milk has lactose sugars and if your child is nursing slowly and often, they can be at risk for tooth decay. Breast milk, just like formula, can bathe the teeth in lactose sugars. Don't assume your child's teeth are okay. Make an appointment early on to have them checked.

We don't have insurance.

Insurance is a great thing, but about half our patients don't have it. Regular dental maintenance like teeth cleaning and fluoride treatments saves money in the long run. It's like taking your car in for regular oil changes so it will last longer. A cavity without insurance can be as little as \$200 or even less, but a neglected cavity that now requires a crown can grow to become almost a \$1000 problem. Plus, dentists don't just look at teeth, we look at the bone and tissue in their mouth as well. Mouth health is connected to body health, and proper dental care can even help prevent other diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and even premature birth. Keep in mind the goal: Children who receive fluoride treatments, cleanings, and sealants can often enter adulthood with NO cavities.

When parents and dentists work together to form good dental habits, and establish and execute a plan for good dental choices and oral health, there is no reason a child who benefits from all of today's dental technology cannot reach adulthood with zero dental decay.



Dr. Thomas Kellogg was born in Howell, graduated from Howell High School, Michigan State University, and received his Dental Education from the University of Michigan Dental School in 1983. Dr. Kellogg is a 3rd generation dentist and practiced with his father for 5 years. He resides in Howell with his three children. He can be reached at Howell Dental Center www.smilemaker.org