

A young boy with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and blue shorts, is smiling broadly while brushing his teeth with a red toothbrush. He is holding a brown teddy bear wearing a white sweater. He is standing on a stack of colorful books (red, blue, yellow) on a tiled floor. The background shows a bathroom with a white cabinet, a gold door handle, and a window with light-colored tiles.

ALL SMILES

Brush twice a day,
swish and rinse:
Keeping your family's
oral health in good
shape seems
straightforward
enough, doesn't it? We
speak to renowned
dentist, *Dr Phil Davies*,
about how we should
really be caring for our
children's teeth...

Despite being one of the most important features in the human body—just think of how many times a day you grin and flash those pearly whites—many of us neglect our teeth, ignoring the advice of our dentists when it comes to flossing on a daily basis, using an electric toothbrush or going for regular professional cleanings. And when you consider that the state of our mouths to be a window to our overall health (poor oral health can lead to anything from cardiovascular and pregnancy problems to diabetes, osteoporosis and Alzheimer’s disease), it’s more important than ever that we start taking care of not only our own teeth and gums, but those of our children, too.

According to the first-ever national survey of oral health in the UAE, conducted in 2009, 54 per cent of 12 year-olds were suffering from dental caries (preventable tooth decay or cavities), with this percentage rising to a worrying 65 per cent in 15 year-olds. In the same survey, 17 per cent of 5 year-olds were found to be caries-free, while another study found that caries affect more than 80 per cent of the UAE population, making it the most prevalent chronic oral health condition in the country among both children and adults.

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“From my personal experience of treating patients from this region, the key problem seems to be gum disease. In its worst form, gum disease can lead to periodontitis, which can result in tooth loss, so it needs to be taken seriously,” says Dr Phil Davies, a well-respected dentist based in the world-renowned medical district of Harley Street, Central London. “While gum disease tends to be more of a problem among adults, oral health habits tend to be passed down, so there is a greater likelihood of children developing the disease as well,” he continues.

Dr. Davies—who has treated numerous patients from the GCC during the past 20 years—is passionate about paediatric oral health. His Educational Schools

Programme, which sees him working with schools and nurseries across the UK to make kids aware of how important it is to care for your oral health, has been hugely successful and Dr. Davies is very keen to bring it to classrooms across the UAE. The programme, which is highly interactive, involves quizzes, photos and giant-sized models of the mouth and teeth. “It seems a crime that in this day and age, children all over the world are unnecessarily living with gum disease and tooth decay simply as a result of lack of education where oral health is concerned,” he says.

A VITAL ROLE

“We recommend children start to learn about the importance of good oral health from as young as two years, when parents should start to introduce tooth brushing. Learning the importance of basics such as thorough brushing and flossing, and following a healthy diet from an early age, will ensure children get the best possible start when it comes to their oral health. Also, if good habits are instilled from the start, they tend to be carried on throughout adult life,” Dr. Davies says.

As teeth play a vital role in enabling us to eat, talk and smile, they can also seriously affect our confidence. A study by the School of Dental Medicine at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Carol Davila” in Bucharest, Romania, found that individuals with extracted teeth and poor gingival condition had significantly lower levels of self-confidence than those with a full set of healthy teeth, while participants experiencing self-

reported gingival bleeding had lower values when it came to self-control. Experts believe that the status of oral health is very closely linked to self-confidence levels, which suggests this could also be an important factor in child development.

“As a dentist, I find it extremely frustrating that not enough adults, let alone children, are aware of the simple measures required to ensure healthy teeth and gums. Our teeth are usually a good indicator of our overall health, so it’s extremely important that we give them the care and attention they deserve,” says Dr. Davies.

A CAREFUL DIET

So what can we do about it? First, make sure your children’s diets are right. “Avoid all types of fizzy drinks—they contain huge amounts of acid, which is highly damaging to tooth enamel. Always opt for water or milk instead. Eat cheese or drink milk after sugary snacks, as both can help neutralise damaging acids. If you do want to give your child the occasional ‘treat,’ always opt for chocolate over and above sticky, chewed sweets. Finally, always eat snacks in one go, as opposed to a period of time which can do far more damage,” Dr. Davies advises.

Another good reason to avoid over-indulgence of sugary sweets and snacks is the link between oral health and obesity: “Obesity is very much linked to a diet high in sugar and saturated fats. Such a diet often includes sweets, crisps, →

THE DENTIST’S RULES

Are you and your child brushing right? Make sure you do it properly with Dr. Davies’s top tooth-brushing tips:

- Always brush in a circular motion, never up and down, as this can cause receding and bleeding gums.
- Remember to just focus on one tooth at a time.
- Remember to brush the tongue, which is a breeding ground for bacteria.
- Brush for a minimum of two minutes, twice a day.
- Never brush immediately after a meal, as acids left over from food and drink can damage the enamel.
- Replace your child’s toothbrush



- every three months.
- Flossing is just as important as brushing and should be attempted once a child has at least two teeth.

sugary drinks and snacks—all of which can also play havoc with teeth,” says Dr. Davies, adding: “Simple, immediate measures that can be taken include switching sugary snacks and treats for healthier versions, such as popcorn and fruit bars. Not giving your child anything other than water before bed is also crucial, and if they do drink fruit juice, dilute it with water and get them to use a straw, so it is not directly aimed at their teeth.” With obesity rates among children between 6 and 16 years old in the UAE as high as 30 per cent*, it’s indeed a factor too important to ignore—especially when it comes to milk teeth.

“A common misconception is that milk teeth are not important and will fall out anyway, so there is less inclination among parents to instil a good oral health culture among their children. However, healthy milk teeth are important for the development of permanent teeth—any decay or infection in milk teeth can cause damage to the permanent teeth developing beneath them. Milk teeth are also ‘space savers’ and help ‘guide’ permanent teeth into the correct position, so it’s crucial to take good care of them too,” he says.

KNOCK OUTS

As kids will be kids, which inevitably means getting into accidents from time to time, seeing your child accidentally knock out a tooth is a circumstance many parents will have to deal with—and possibly even more than once. If this happens, Dr. Davies says to first and foremost stay calm, then, holding the tooth by the crown (the white part) rather than the root (the yellow part), wash it briefly under cold running water for 10 seconds. Once clean, try to re-implant the tooth in to the socket, asking your child to bite down on a handkerchief to hold it in place. If the tooth has fallen out completely, Dr. Davies suggests placing it in some milk immediately for transportation. “If milk is unavailable, place it in the mouth between the molar tooth and the cheek,” he said. Once your “initial rescue operation” is taken care of, seek emergency dental treatment immediately.



THE RIGHT TECHNIQUE

Now that the diet (and attitude) is taken care of, the next important step is to make sure your kids are brushing and flossing properly. “We should all be brushing our teeth for at least two minutes, twice a day. However, for children those two minutes can probably seem like a lifetime. So, why not try to make it fun by using a mirror? [This way] they can actually see where and what they are brushing. Also, encourage them to brush throughout, for example, the duration of their favourite song on the radio, which will help give them something to focus on,” says Dr. Davies. He also cautions parents not to forget to encourage them to spit out excess toothpaste, but not to rinse excessively as the fluoride in the

toothpaste helps to harden the enamel.

While electric toothbrushes have been clinically proven to be slightly more effective than manual ones, Dr. Davies claims that with the right technique, a manual brush can still be equally effective. With such a wide variety of toothpastes now available on supermarket shelves, it’s not always easy finding the right one but by following Dr. Davies’ rule of thumb—to stick to the ones containing fluoride and that are manufactured by reputable companies—it’s easy to choose the right one suited to your needs. “[For instance], it may be Parodontax if you have gum problems, Sensodyne if you have sensitive teeth, or one of the toothpastes made especially for children,” he explains.

KEEP A WATCHFUL EYE

Dr. Davies stresses how important it is for parents to supervise brushing and flossing, at least until kids are 7 or 8 years old. Up until then, he feels parents should either brush their child's teeth themselves, or help out with those hard-to-reach places. "Try to brush your teeth at the same time as your child; children love copying their parents, and so should easily pick up your techniques in ensuring a good, thorough brush," he adds. Making sure you floss regularly, too, is also important: a study found that tongue and tooth brushing in combination with dental flossing can decrease gingival bleeding by 38 per cent within two weeks, as well as reducing Halitosis, or bad breath.

Keep an eye out for plaque and food deposits: "They are easy to see and easy to remove with good brushing," Dr. Davies says. Bleeding gums may be an indicator of gum disease, while brown spots on teeth may indicate dental decay. "If you observe either of these, make an appointment to see your dentist. Try to discourage habits such as finger- and thumb- sucking, which can give rise to significant orthodontic

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problems, and if your child complains of toothache or any kind of mouth pain, take them to the dentist as soon as possible."

Getting your child to the dentist isn't always an easy feat, as most parents are well aware. As Dr. Davies points out, most people have had, or know of someone, who has had an irrational fear of the dentist's chair. "Such a fear often develops as a child and can stay with us long into our adult life," he says, continuing: "To help prevent your own child going through the same feelings of anxiety and dread, a first visit to the dentist is recommended at around three years of age to help them familiarise with the environment, and help them get

to know and trust their dentist." Dr. Davies also suggests taking your child along with you to one of your regular check-up visits. This way, they can see how happy and calm you are, so hopefully these feelings will rub off on them too and they won't associate the dentist's chair with frightened or anxious feelings instead.

STAY REGULAR

Aside from when noticeable problems arise, Dr. Davies advises making sure your child develops good habits starting from two years of age and up, to be continued throughout their adult life. Rather than waiting until an emergency, a minimum of two check-ups per year are recommended for both children and adults, as a part of everyone's general health regime. "Maintaining healthy teeth and gums is not rocket science, it is achieved by following very basic measures," Dr. Davies says, continuing: "As experts in our field for more than 20 years, we feel it is our duty to help ensure the next generation is equipped with the knowledge to achieve and maintain happy and healthy smiles throughout their lives." ■

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