

Early Start

The pediatric dentists of **Children's Dental Health** teach patients how to establish good habits as a foundation for lifelong dental health.

by LEIGH STUART photography by JODY ROBINSON



February is National Children's Dental Health Month. The month-long observance grew out of a one-day event first held in 1941, with the goal of bringing attention to the specialized care that children's teeth need in order to form strong foundations for lifelong oral health.

Children's Dental Health (CDH), which has multiple locations throughout Pennsylvania and, soon, Delaware, is using the observance as "a golden opportunity" to remind patients—and their parents—of the importance of caring for teeth at an early age.

"Dental health is associated with overall body health," says Malay Mathur, D.D.S., who practices out of the CDH locations in Exton and Springfield. "National Children's Dental Health Month is an excellent platform for us to be able to provide and empower our patients and their families with education and resources about good oral health habits. Surprisingly, a lot of people don't even know that you're supposed to be visiting the dentist every six months."

Dr. Mathur and his fellow pediatric dentists at CDH have been working diligently to spread the word. Anthony Monteiro, D.M.D., who treats children at the CDH office in West Grove and will lead its forthcoming Wilmington, Del., practice, is among those who work closely with parents to ensure the best possible care for young teeth.

"We see a lot of parents who say, 'Oh, they're just baby teeth,'" he says. "Yes, this is true, but a child can lose a first tooth around the age of 6 or 7 and the last typically around the age of 12 or 13. Some people think a kid will lose all of his or her teeth at age 6. Parents need to know that those baby teeth are going to be in their child's mouth longer than anticipated."

Starting proper care at a young age is vital to creating good lifelong habits, according to

Dr. Monteiro. It can also prevent conditions that may affect a child's life in other ways, such as dental-related pain that can cause children to miss school and parents to call out of work. In other words, he says, "Parents need to understand the risks associated with not establishing an early dental health routine for their children because they're 'just baby teeth.'"

Staying Cavity-free

Sophia Yi, D.D.S., who sees patients at CDH's West Philadelphia, South Philadelphia, and Springfield locations, recommends children see their pediatric dentist by their first birthday. It can be as early as six months, she suggests, noting these early appointments are largely about educating parents.

"I am a pediatric dentist because it is innately important to me," Dr. Yi says. "Children do not have their own voice, so we want to make sure we care for them the best we can. One danger we explain to parents is baby bottle rot, which happens when babies fall asleep with a bottle in their mouths. It's much better to address oral health earlier rather

than later, after the damage has been done."

The doctors recommend children brush twice per day using toothpaste with fluoride, while also emphasizing the importance of flossing. If a child has teeth that are touching each other, those teeth should be flossed, regardless of the child's age. Also, Dr. Monteiro says he "highly recommends" electronic toothbrushes, particularly for young kids who might resist brushing. Many of these brushes now feature popular cartoon characters or superheroes that can inspire kids to brush.

"If you can keep your child's mouth clean," he adds, "it is your best shot for keeping your child cavity-free."

Additional tips include closely monitoring a child's diet and limiting the consumption of sweets, such as sugary candies and snacks, as well as flavored milks and acidic juices.

"Sticky candies keep us in business," Dr. Monteiro says. "These things keep kids coming in and out with lots of cavities. Vitamins, Fruit Roll-Ups and similar snacks, things with high-fructose corn syrup—kids are bombarded with sugar. I like to say, 'If it's not chocolate, you can't have it.' Baby teeth are much more susceptible to cavities, because enamel is thinner in baby teeth. This is just another reason why we're taking care of the teeth from an early age."

Time spent with a practitioner who has been specially trained in pediatric dentistry can help to prevent problems from taking root, so to speak. As Dr. Yi points out, not only do pediatric dentists have specialized knowledge of children's teeth but they also receive an additional two years of training in their field.

"Having gone through the training myself, there are so many things you don't realize you didn't know until you know them," Dr. Yi says. "The functionality of a child's teeth is different; kids get cavities easier, and baby teeth are important because they are space maintainers for permanent teeth. When you wait too long, or teeth fall out or have to be extracted too soon, this can lead to space loss, which can lead to teeth getting stuck under the bone or massive orthodontic treatment."

The training is not only thorough but also quite intense, according to Dr. Mathur.

"The work we do, many general dentists just don't get that kind of training," he says. "It involves learning more about baby teeth, how to work with kids, the treatments to be



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undergone and planned depending on a child's behavior—especially children who may have had a bad experience before—and the variety of treatment modalities, the kinds of fillings for kids' teeth."

Putting Children First

Children's Dental Health designed each of its offices with children in mind, from the equipment to the décor to the staff of dedicated pediatric dentists caring for kids, including those with special needs. The state-of-the-art facilities feature specialized technology such as digital imaging to address children's specific dental needs. Dr. Yi notes that the new office in Springfield features TVs in every room, and a spacious environment to accommodate strollers.

The success of CDH's model is evident in its steady growth and expansion. The Wilmington practice will be the 20th location under the CDH brand. In addition to featuring the advanced equipment, treatment protocols, and kid-friendly feel for which CDH has become known, the new office will feature multiple video game consoles, plus a greeting area where children can enjoy prizes, coloring books, and more. Uniquely, the office will feature an open bay setup, which can be very helpful for soothing children who are anxious or frightened.

"We are the experts in treating kids, and I have an affinity for working with special-needs patients," Dr. Mathur says. "When we can work with special-needs or young patients and get them to the point where they are able to sit calmly and relaxed for treatments and checkups, there's no better feeling. It's the best part of the job." ■



Drs. Malay Mathur and Sophia Yi, with Dr. Anthony Monteiro (below)



For more information on Children's Dental Health locations throughout the area, or to schedule an appointment for a child, visit ChildrensDentalHealth.com or call (866) KIDS-DENTAL.