

# Tooth development in babies and toddlers



As part of a community campaign to promote good oral health care for babies and toddlers The Australian Dental Association (ADA) has developed a fact sheet on tooth development, which includes the following guidelines and tips for parents and carers.

## Primary teeth

Baby or primary teeth start to form in the jawbone before birth. A baby's first primary tooth usually erupts at about six months of age but this can occur as early as birth or as late as the child's first birthday. The average child has a full set of 20 primary teeth by the age of about three years. The first visit to the dentist should be within six months of the eruption of the first tooth or by the child's first birthday.

## Teething

The appearance of the primary teeth is commonly called 'teething'. It's not uncommon for babies to experience some discomfort during this time.

Most babies are irritable when new teeth break through the gums. Signs and symptoms of discomfort include:

- \* Frequent crying and crankiness
- \* A slight fever
- \* Reddened cheeks and drooling
- \* Appetite loss and upset stomach
- \* More frequent dirty nappies
- \* Sucking or gnawing on toys
- \* Pulling of the ear on the same side as the erupting tooth

To help relieve the discomfort, the ADA recommends washing your hands, and then gently rubbing your baby's gum with a clean finger. Alternatively you can give your baby a dummy, teething ring or wet washcloth to bite. Teething rings can be chilled in the refrigerator before use to help manage gum swelling and pain. (Do not put teething rings in the freezer.)



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Signs and symptoms may appear and disappear over several days. If a fever becomes prolonged, take your child to the doctor. Ask your dentist or pharmacist for advice before using any pain reliever or oral gel that contains a local anaesthetic. These preparations are not usually suitable for babies under three months.

**Never** give aspirin to a baby or child.

### Common Concerns: Thumb Sucking

Thumb sucking is a natural reflex in babies and young children. Most children lose interest in thumb sucking and dummies at two to four years.

Children who continue to suck after the permanent teeth have appeared risk developing crooked teeth, particularly if the sucking is forceful or frequent. Also, speech defects may arise, especially with the “s” and “th” sounds.

Gently encourage your child to give up thumb sucking. Setting the goal with a reward once the child has achieved this may assist. See the dentist for advice if your child cannot stop thumb sucking by the end of the first year at school. In rare cases, referral to a child psychologist may be helpful.

### Losing primary teeth, gaining permanent teeth

Permanent teeth (often referred to as ‘adult’ teeth) start to form inside the jawbone after a child is born. A permanent tooth appears in the gap left in the gum after a primary tooth has fallen out. Losing primary teeth is usually painless, despite occasional minor bleeding from the gums.

Although your child may complain that chewing is temporarily difficult with loose or missing teeth, it’s important they still eat healthy foods. Keep up your child’s tooth brushing routine, being particularly gentle around any tender areas of gum. Sometimes, a loose primary tooth will not fall out immediately. Avoid yanking out the tooth with string or pulling the tooth. If the roots have not fully resorbed, a violent tug could snap the tooth and cause pain and infection.

Occasionally, a permanent tooth erupts before the primary tooth has fallen out. In most cases, the primary tooth will fall out within a few days or weeks. See the dentist if the primary tooth has not fallen out after two or three months.

While most children are excited about losing primary teeth, some may be anxious about loose teeth. Celebrate each shed tooth with your child. Children start to lose primary teeth at around six years of age and do not finish losing their primary teeth until 12 years of age. If you are concerned about the rate at which your child is developing then discuss this with your dentist. Your dentist may suggest an X-ray examination to check the position of the un-erupted teeth. Generally, if a child’s primary teeth appeared late, they will also get their permanent teeth later.

Visit [www.ada.org.au](http://www.ada.org.au) for more information on oral care for babies and toddlers. Additionally, the ADA has created a brochure, available from your dentist, which contains comprehensive information on caring for teeth during early childhood.



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