

At Halloween, Protect kids' teeth; prevent school absences

Did you know that tooth decay is among the most common health issues affecting young children, and that dental disease is one of the leading causes of school absence?

The Arizona Department of Health Services estimates that almost half of the children in kindergarten have some decay experience, and about one-third have untreated decay. Nearly one in 10 is in need of urgent dental treatment.

With Halloween just around the corner, we all have the opportunity to prevent tooth decay in young kids.

For starters, we can give out something other than candy to trick-or-treaters who come to our door. Ideas for non-candy treats include: temporary tattoos; mini-card games; fake jewelry, like spider rings and bracelets; play-dough; stamps; or, mini-packs of crayons or colored pencils.

If you do pass out candy, avoid hard candy and chewy treats, which stick to teeth longer, like caramels, gummy bears, taffy, etc. Plain chocolate is best, since it washes away faster than anything else.

Halloween also offers the chance to remind parents about the importance of caring for their infant or toddlers' teeth. Some good general guidelines include:

- Clean teeth every day. For infants, you can use a washcloth or infant tooth brush.
- Make sure your child sees a dentist by age 1 and every year thereafter.
- Give children healthy snacks, such as fruits, vegetables and nuts, instead of candy.
- Limit sugary drinks, including too much fruit juice, and only allow milk or water in bottles.

First Things First is doing its part by funding preventive oral health services in many communities. In fiscal year 2014, FTF grantees completed more than 47,000 oral health screenings on kids 5 and younger statewide. More than 42,000 of those kids had fluoride varnishes applied to prevent decay.

As you are putting up decorations and buying treats this Halloween, use the tips above to help ensure that kids arrive at school healthy - smiling - and ready to succeed!