



FIRST THINGS FIRST

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Poor oral health takes a bite out of learning

When we think about getting kids ready for kindergarten, we talk about brain development and early literacy, but did you know that early oral health impacts early learning too?

First Things First reminds communities that February is National Children's Dental Health Month, which raises awareness about the importance of oral health. More than 51 million school hours are lost each year because of dental decay, and many of those problems start before kids enter school.

By age 4, it is estimated that more than half of Arizona's young children have experienced dental decay. And, about one-third of Arizona's 4-year-olds have never even seen a dentist.

Decay starts in the tiny teeth of babies and toddlers and can lead to speech delays and interfere with learning. Early care for a child's teeth will protect their smile and their health for years to come. Here's how families can help:

- Prevent decay by not putting the baby to bed with a bottle. Have babies finish their bedtime and naptime bottles before going to sleep.
- For bottle feedings, use only formula, milk or breast milk inside and avoid using sugary beverages such as juice or soda.
- Take your child to the dentist around their first birthday, or soon after the first tooth appears.
- As soon as the first tooth appears, begin cleaning by wiping with a clean, damp cloth every day. When more teeth come in, switch to a small, soft toothbrush.
- Brush your child's teeth twice a day until your child has the skill to handle the toothbrush alone and is able to spit out the toothpaste and rinse well.

First Things First is doing its part to promote good oral health for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. In fiscal year 2014 alone, the organization sponsored more than 79,000 oral screenings and the application of 75,000 preventive fluoride varnishes statewide to the teeth of kids 5 and younger.

Tooth decay is the most chronic childhood disease in the United States, but it's also the most preventable. By following a few steps, we can send our kids to school with healthy teeth, reduce absences and get them ready for success.