

Health of primary teeth an early predictor of adult teeth

January 8 2018



Credit: Julia Lucia

Do children really need their baby teeth? Many believe that primary teeth aren't all that important. After all, they typically fall out by age 12, and new, adult teeth take their place.

That line of thinking tends to leave experts in the dental community with a grimace.

In a practical and medical sense, the health of primary teeth is an early predictor of adult teeth. A research team headed by the Case Western Reserve University School of Dental Medicine sought to improve parents' and caregivers' [perception](#) of the importance of [baby teeth](#).

The team's findings were published in a recent article in *Contemporary Clinic Trials*.

Unlike other medical issues, tooth decay and cavities are preventable with adequate self-management strategies.

"Parents' failure to recognize the importance of baby teeth is associated with adverse health habits and outcomes for their children, such as less tooth-brushing and a lower likelihood of having preventative dental visits and higher rates of tooth decay," said Suchitra Nelson, assistant dean in the dental school's Department of Community Dentistry, who leads the research.

Other researchers include Mary Beth Slusar and Jeffrey Albert, both also from the Case Western Reserve School of Dental Medicine, and Christine Riedy, from the Harvard University School of Dental Medicine.

Several ongoing, randomized clinical trials are testing oral health-behavior interventions to change outcomes. In addition, researchers are looking at the perceptions of chronic [tooth decay](#) and cavities between parents who did and did not believe baby teeth were important.

One approach used in self-managing [chronic medical conditions](#) is the Common Sense Model of Self-Regulation, a psychological framework

describing the person's perception of a chronic disease that drives coping and action planning.

In other words, changing parental perception is fundamentally important to view cavities and decay as a chronic disease, rather than an acute symptomatic disease, to improve dental outcomes.

Dental issues more disproportionately and adversely affect children in lower-income households. According to the article, about \$450 million has been spent nationally on preventable dental conditions on Medicaid-enrolled children age 1 and 20 between 2010 and 2011.

The article notes that the Common Sense Model behavioral intervention can reach a wider audience—parents, providers and primary-care practices—to change perceptions about baby [teeth](#) and generally improve children's oral health.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

Citation: Health of primary teeth an early predictor of adult teeth (2018, January 8) retrieved 7 March 2023 from

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