

EXPERT Advice

Taking Care of Your Child's Smile



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Canadian and American orthodontic associations recommend that every child has an orthodontic examination by the time they turn seven. There are many reasons why this appointment is important for your child's dental health.

By seven, your child typically has a few permanent teeth along with several baby teeth. At this point, the jaws have established their growth pattern, and an orthodontist can see how the jaw sizes and tooth sizes correspond. Two common



issues that can appear are crowding and excessive spacing. If there is inadequate space for the permanent teeth to develop, then they will be crowded. On the other hand, excessive spacing is seen when there is too much room for the teeth. By catching this early, an orthodontist can ensure that the proper amount of space will be maintained for all the permanent teeth. For instance, when crowding is a concern, space maintainers (small, comfortable, fixed appliances), can be inserted as space holders for permanent teeth. When severe crowding exists, it may not be possible to create all the space needed. In this case, a process called serial extractions can be planned to remove some permanent teeth and allow the remaining teeth to come into better alignment. Alternately, your orthodontist can guide some teeth to come in such a way that they will close excess space due to missing permanent teeth. This process can prevent your child from entering his or her tweens with severely crowded, spaced or displaced teeth.

An orthodontist can affect the amount of space available for teeth as well as how straight the permanent teeth grow in. Permanent teeth can be guided to come into better alignment when baby teeth are lost in the proper sequence and at the correct time—something that doesn't always happen naturally when there is space or crowding. An orthodontist may sometimes recommend timely extractions of over-retained baby teeth for this reason.

In addition to spacing, the manner in which the upper and lower jaw bones

meet can be evaluated by age seven. Some children display vertical, horizontal or transverse jaw bone discrepancies by this age. Starting growth modification therapy early may prevent jaw surgery or more complicated orthodontics. Expanders, retainer-like removable pieces, headgear and fixed appliances are all ways to help correct these discrepancies. Growth modification must be started at the correct time during pre-pubertal growth. Having your child screened at age seven assures that you do not miss this window of opportunity.

Another benefit of an orthodontic examination by age seven is the detection of harmful habits. Some children suck their thumbs, fingers or lower lip. These habits can have a negative impact on tooth positions and the bite. Habit breaking appliances or habit-ceasing programs can be recommended to reverse some of the detrimental changes as well as prevent further problems.

We know that several orthodontic problems can be prevented or simplified with early assessment and treatment. Above are just some examples of problems that can be addressed early to reduce the likelihood of more expensive and more complicated orthodontics later on. Even jaw surgery may be prevented in a lot of instances with timely treatment.

In our next column, I'd like to answer some questions about orthodontics and jaw/tooth development that you, our readers, may have. Please send your questions to us at bedfordortho@hotmail.com. FLH