

All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth!

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As the famous and humorous Christmas song reminds us, children may need all of their teeth; or else singing this song, especially the line *Sister Susie sitting on a thistle!* may be quite a mouth full! Proper speech can be, in part, attributed to the preservation of healthy teeth as long as possible. However, when attributed to dental caries, early removal of the maxillary anterior teeth – also known as the “two front teeth” – can be problematic.

As many as 40% of children, younger than five years of age, must have their front teeth extracted due to dental caries. Studies also have shown that the use of the nursing bottle, especially when infants are put to bed with a sweet liquid, is one of the leading causes of cavities in young children. Early childhood caries, formerly known as “baby-bottle caries,” are described in the literature as a specific pattern of dental caries involving the two front teeth.

Parents or professionals may not always identify caries until approximately 18 to 22 months, although they may begin before 12 months of age. In advanced cases, brown, decayed roots may be left and extraction may be required if the decay is extensive or untreatable.

Missing maxillary incisors may have an impact on speech production for the articulation of the “s, z, f, v, th” sounds for a period of time, until permanent teeth appear. However, some studies have shown that premature loss in children younger than three years of age may result in residual speech problems for some, even after the appearance of the adult teeth. Prevention is the best key to support children in their overall health, their oral health and their sound development. You can help in many ways!

Promote healthy teeth development:

- Substitute the milk or juice bottle given in bed for a water bottle. This will prevent caries and promote both good teeth and hearing development.

- Early in life, include an oral hygiene routine in your baby's day. Clean the gums with a clean washcloth and once the first tooth appears, introduce the toothbrush.
- Take a look: lift a lip to see your child's teeth and look behind the teeth. Look for changes in colour or appearance and signs of decay.
- "First visit by the first birthday so children can be caries free by age three." – this slogan is used by many dental professionals in Ottawa. So get to know your dentist or dentist professional or ask to be seen by one working with children.

Promote good hearing:

- Avoid formula or juice bottles in bed. There is good evidence that when a baby is given a bottle of formula or juice while lying flat, the formula can get into the Eustachian tubes and middle ear and cause an infection. Babies are particularly susceptible to ear infections because their Eustachian tubes are short and horizontal. Ear infections, even occasional, may prevent children from appropriately hearing the distinctive features that make up the different sounds of a language.
- The Infant Hearing Program (IHP) is there for your baby and you! Since 2002, all babies born in Ontario can have their hearing screened at birth, in hospital or in a community clinic before the age of three months. For more information about the IHP, contact (613) 688-3979.
- Ear infections are one of the common childhood illnesses. If you are concerned about recurrent ear infections and/or about the hearing status of your child, talk to your family doctor. He or she may refer you to an audiologist.

Promote good speech and language development:

- Have fun playing with sounds: imitate animals, vehicles and silly sounds. Imitate the sounds that your baby or your child makes. Imitate and repeat words too.
- Stress, emphasize and give better models of the sounds and words that your child says! You can do this while reading books, singing songs and playing together.
- Know the milestones! Use the First Words Speech and Language development brochures or visit the website at www.firstwords.ca. If you are concerned about

your child's speech and language development, you can get more information by calling the Ottawa Public Health Information at (613) 580-6744.

Baby teeth are placeholders for permanent teeth. If a child has healthy baby teeth, it is more likely that permanent teeth will have a healthy growth. Baby and permanent teeth are crucial for chewing, speaking and sound development, jaw development and overall health. Although your children may wish for more than their two front teeth, you can help them keep their baby teeth as long as possible. And as the song goes, I too wish you a Merry Christmas.

Early identification makes the difference. Families can access First Words community screening clinics at any time, visit our website at www.firstwords.ca or call OPHI for more information at (613) 580-6744.

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