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So, here's a question: If you as a parent could do a few things that would protect your child's teeth AND lower your child's risk of being overweight…Would you do it?

Of course! However, a recent survey by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry found that many parents don't realize that some of their routine practices contribute to tooth decay. Here are some "for instances":

• Cavity-causing bacteria can be passed from the mouth of a parent or caregiver to their child's mouth when sharing food, or cleaning off a pacifier, or putting fingers in the other's mouth. In other words, children can "catch" cavities.

• Even "healthy" snacks can be damaging to teeth. The longer teeth are exposed to sugar, the more damage is done. Baked snacks like crackers or other cooked starches like pasta, can also lead to cavities, and they stay in the mouth longer than a piece of candy.

• Sipping on sugared beverages (i.e., pop, juice, many flavored waters) all day can cause tooth decay. (Plus—one regular can of pop may contain more than 10 teaspoons of sugar. Check out the calories!) Drink only water between meals.

• Although drinking fluoridated water is the single most important way to prevent cavities, many parents think bottled water is better. Most bottled water does not contain fluoride. If you live in a city with fluoridated water, drink the tap water! 98.6 percent of public water in Minnesota is fluoridated and it is safe to drink. Well water on farms or trailer parks must be tested.
• Putting a child to bed with a bottle of milk, formula, soda pop or juice—all of which contain sugar—means that they will have sugar in their mouth for hours. Since tooth decay can start with the first tooth, always wash off their teeth after eating or drinking. Only a bottle of water before bed is advisable.

Why are rotting "baby teeth" a problem? A child whose teeth hurt won't eat well, won't grow well, and is more likely to develop disease of the permanent teeth.

So the bottom line is that parents can do a lot to ensure their child's long-term health by getting their child to a dentist by the age of 1(check your health plan options, or community health centers); limiting snack and sugared beverage intake; and simply eating together at meal times.

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