Don't Overlook Your Child's Oral Health This School Year

The 2020-2021 school year was fraught with anxiety, stress, and confusion for students and parents (and teachers!) alike due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adapt to remote and hybrid learning modalities. The increased availability of vaccines last spring brought somewhat of a return to normal, with more students heading back to class for in-person learning. But as we head into this school year, concerns are arising again due to the COVID-19 Delta variant and its high transmission rates, and debates over vaccine and mask requirements for teachers and eligible students (at this point, children age 12 and under are ineligible for the vaccines, which are still undergoing clinical trials, with the U.S. Food & Drug Administration telling NBC News in July that emergency use authorization for the vaccine for that age group may not be approved until early to midwinter 2022). These serious issues aside, one thing that shouldn't be up for debate is scheduling a dental exam as part of the back-to-school routine for your student.

According to the American Dental Association (ADA), cavities are one of the most prevalent infectious diseases among children in the United States, and more than 34 million school hours are lost each year due to dental-related causes. Untreated cavities can cause pain and infections that may lead to problems with eating, speaking, playing, and learning. And with many children learning entirely virtually last year, dietary habits likely led to increased tooth decay risk due to more frequent snacking, immediate access to sugary and carbonated beverages, and disruption to their daily routine. That's why keeping your child's semi-annual dental checkup is even more important than ever. A dentist will be able to examine your child's teeth and mouth for signs of tooth decay or other issues and make sure everything in the mouth is developing properly, which may help prevent them from missing valuable school days in the future.

Preventing dental disease in children also includes adopting good oral hygiene habits and mouth-friendly diets. You can help your child maintain a healthy smile all year long by making sure they floss their teeth and brush at least twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste. Also, avoid packing school lunch bags with snack items such as candy, sticky granola bars, and raisins, which can cling to the teeth and lead to decay, or sugar-filled fruit juices and energy drinks. Lastly, dental sealants, which are thin plastic coatings brushed and hardened onto the surfaces of molars, are also very important. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), dental sealants prevent more than 80% of cavities in the permanent molars, in which nine in 10 cavities occur.

And for those concerned about the safety of dental visits, the ADA and Massachusetts Dental Society want to remind all patients that dental professionals have always been required to complete extensive and ongoing training in infection control. In addition, per guidelines from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, masks are still required in all health care settings—including dental practices—for providers and patients.

Parents, you have a lot of concerns on your mind as your child enters this school year, but ensuring they have a healthy smile shouldn't be one of them.