

# Dental Emergencies: Trauma to Primary Teeth

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Accidents involving the mouth and teeth are common in children, especially when children are learning motor skills. Trauma to the mouth and teeth may also occur during sports, falls during recreational activities (such as riding a bike or roller skating), motor vehicle accidents, or disagreements with playmates. If your child has trauma to their teeth, it is important to assess your child for additional signs of trauma to other regions of the body, especially the head, which may indicate need for **immediate medical attention**. This handout will specifically discuss what you should do if your child has trauma to a primary (baby) tooth.

## **How do I know if my child injured a baby tooth or an adult tooth?**

On average, primary teeth erupt around ages 6 months and complete eruption between 2-3 years of age. Children 5 and under likely have all primary teeth. Starting around age 6, adult teeth start to appear in the mouth, starting with the first adult molars in the back of the mouth and “incisors” which are the front teeth. Between the ages of 6-12, children have “mixed dentition” which is a combination of baby teeth and permanent teeth. In general, baby teeth are whiter and smaller than permanent teeth. It is important to know if teeth that are involved in trauma are primary or permanent since treatment recommendations may differ. Visit <https://tinyurl.com/y6ta2w4h> to view the American Dental Association chart that lists when different teeth are likely to erupt.

## **What should I do if my child’s baby tooth was knocked out, displaced, and/or fractured?**

Unlike permanent teeth, if a primary tooth was completely knocked out of your child’s mouth, **do not** put the tooth back in your child’s mouth.

If your child's tooth was displaced but remains in the mouth, see your dentist right away. While at the dentist, your dentist may reposition the tooth and splint the tooth to adjacent teeth with a wire so that the tooth does not move and has a chance to heal. If the tooth is fractured, your dentist may repair the tooth and provide additional treatments depending on the extent of damage.

### **How should we help our child care for their mouth after trauma?**

- **Pain management:** Over-the-counter Tylenol may be used to help manage discomfort. Make sure to follow dosing instructions based on weight of your child and do not exceed maximum recommended amounts. Please have your child take with food and water.
- **Diet:** Maintain a soft diet.
  - Depending on the severity of the injury, you may need to limit your child's diet to only soft foods for the next several weeks. Follow your dentist's recommended timeline.
  - Ask your child to avoid using the injured teeth as much as possible, especially for biting or tearing. Cut up foods so that the foods are easier to chew.
- **Mouth care:** Make sure that your child's mouth is extremely clean which will aid the healing process.
  - In order to reduce further trauma to teeth and for comfort, run your child's soft-bristled toothbrush under warm water to make the bristles softer before brushing.
  - If your child had a splint placed by the dentist, make sure to keep the splint clean by brushing gently around the splint and being careful not to cause the splint to dislodge.
  - If the splint becomes loose, please contact your child's dentist immediately as the splint may have sharp edges and the tooth may move without the splint in place. **Never attempt to replace or remove**

**the splint on your own. Do not allow your child to play with the splint.**

- **Sports/Activities:** Your child should avoid any activities that may put them at risk for bleeding and/or additional trauma to teeth.

### **What may happen to the injured teeth?**

The injured tooth may:

1. Change color- An injured tooth may turn dark. This may indicate the nerve (pulp) of the tooth is dying.
2. Become sensitive or lose sensation- Nerve cells may be more sensitive or no longer able to sense hot or cold. If the teeth are sensitive, try to limit the temperature of food and beverages to room temperature.
3. Become infected (abscess)- Watch for a bump in the gums or draining liquid from around the tooth which may indicate the tooth has an infection requiring prompt treatment.
4. Become mobile or loose- Your child's tooth may need time before it is stable in the socket again.
  - If the dentist has placed a splint to keep the tooth in position, make sure to follow the dentist's instructions including follow-up timeline. Depending on the amount of trauma, the tooth may be able to become stable or may become more loose. If the splint becomes loose or falls off while your child is healing, it is important to contact your dentist as soon as possible. **The splint is very important to try to help the tooth heal.** As mentioned above, **never try to repair the splint or remove the splint on your own.**
5. Cause problems with the way your child's permanent teeth erupt into the mouth. In order to keep space available for adult teeth to erupt into the mouth in the correct position, your dentist may place a "space maintainer" and/or your child may need braces.

Your dentist will evaluate your child's teeth over time to assess changes as your child is healing from their injury. If any teeth change color, become sensitive or lose sensation, become infected, or become mobile, your child may need **endodontic therapy (root canal) or extraction (removing the tooth)**. If the trauma causes changes to the way your child's teeth come together and/or start to impact the way their adult teeth are developing, your child may need **orthodontic therapy (braces)**.

### **What is my follow-up care?**

Your child may have several follow-ups over the next few weeks to months in order to assess how their tooth is healing from trauma. Your child's dentist will determine their follow-up care plan based on their individual needs. Follow-ups may include:

- Splint evaluation and removal
- Restoration of tooth (filling) if not completed at time of initial visit
- Endodontic therapy (root canal therapy)
- Extraction (removal of tooth)
- Orthodontic treatment (braces) or space maintainer

To learn more about dental trauma and have access to a **free dental trauma phone app**, visit the International Association of Dental Trauma's website at <https://www.iadt-dentaltrauma.org/for-patients.html>. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask your dental team!

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