

# Dental health starts at a very young age

by Angela Mombourquette

“Good habits develop early,” says Dr. Ross Anderson, Chief of Dentistry at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax. “All the strategies that apply to caring for children’s teeth between the ages of three and six start way before. If you don’t want to have problems, the care has to start as soon as teeth start coming... by about age six months.”

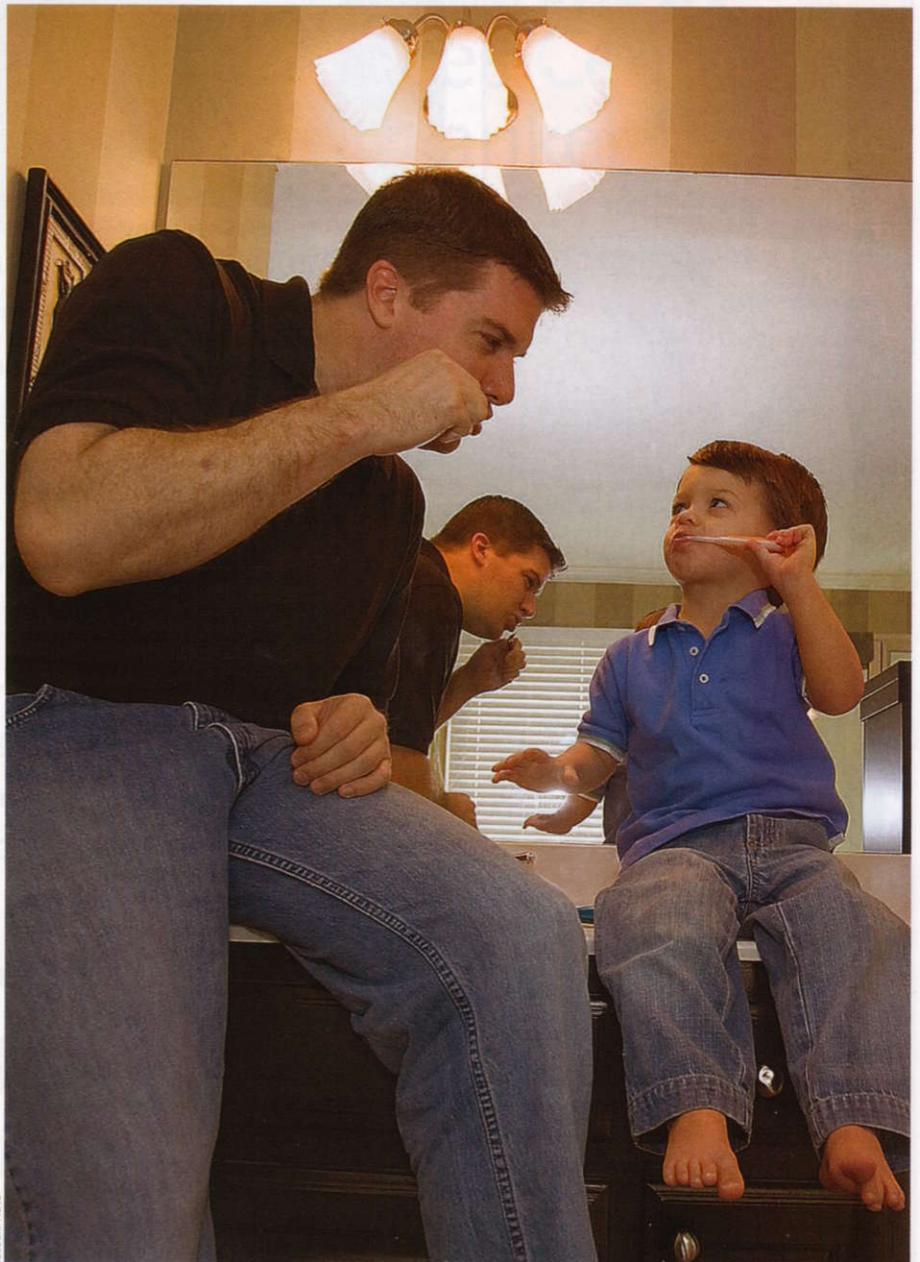
Developing those good dental habits early on could save you, and your child, a lot of grief in the years to come. “We estimate that about 28 to 30 per cent of Canadian kids will have more than a couple of cavities in their mouth by age three,” says Dr. Anderson.

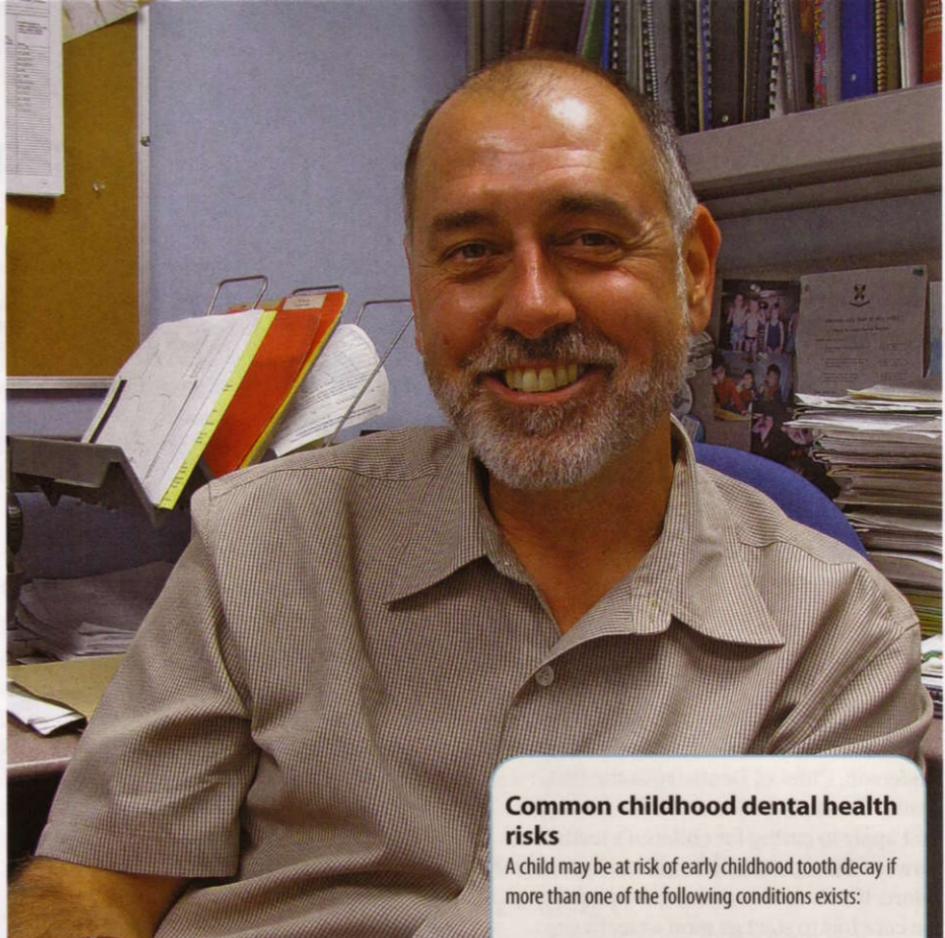
That’s why it’s important to start brushing twice daily, as soon as those first teeth pop. The decision about whether to use a fluoridated toothpaste should be made in consultation with a dentist.

“At a year of age, the child should have a risk assessment to determine whether they are going to be at risk for developing cavities or not,” says Dr. Anderson. If the risk is high (for example, if the child lives in an area with a non-fluoridated water supply) brushing up to age three should include a portion of fluoridated toothpaste the size of a grain of rice.

When the child hits three, the portion of fluoridated toothpaste needed goes up by a notch. “From age three to six, the current recommendation from both Health Canada and from the Canadian Dental Association is that a pea-sized portion of toothpaste be used on an appropriately-sized brush,” advises Dr. Anderson.

He says one of the secrets to getting your child onboard is to make brushing fun. “I check for dinosaurs in the mouth, or chase sugar bugs, or sing a song.” And while it’s okay to let a child brush his or her own teeth, a parent should always follow up and finish the job. “We usually say kids can start





Dr. Ross Anderson, Chief of Dentistry at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax.

brushing on their own when they can colour in between the lines, or when they graduate from Velcro to tying shoelaces.”

It’s also important that parents are vigilant when it comes to detecting tooth decay before it becomes a problem. “When they’re brushing, they should lift the lip and look right along the necks of the teeth where the teeth meet the gums. If you take a fingernail and scratch, you shouldn’t be able to pick off any white fuzz. If you see a white chalky area developing along the necks of the teeth, or in between teeth, then we already have decay starting.”

And good oral health isn’t just about brushing. Diet, says Dr. Anderson, is one of the keys to a healthy mouth. “The kids who don’t get cavities are the kids who have their three meals a day and they have their two scheduled snacks and the snacks are healthy: fresh fruit, fresh veggies, cheddar cheese,” he says.

“What we want to avoid is what we call ‘sip and play.’ If your kid is sipping juice from a sippy cup at age 12 to 18 months, I can virtually guarantee you that that kid will develop cavities, and he or she will develop cavities of the worst kind. By age three, [that child] will already be on my doorstep.”

And even the cheerful Dr. Anderson admits with a smile that his office is not where most kids want to hang out. “A three-year-old’s average attention span is

### Common childhood dental health risks

A child may be at risk of early childhood tooth decay if more than one of the following conditions exists:

1. The child lives in an area with a non-fluoridated water supply and low natural fluoride levels. (Contact your municipal government to determine if drinking water is fluoridated).
2. The child has a visible defect, notch, cavity or white chalky area on a baby tooth in the front of the mouth.
3. The child regularly consumes sugar (even natural sugars) between meals. This includes use of a bottle or sippy cup filled with any liquid other than water and consumption of sweetened medications.
4. The child has special health care needs that limit his or her co-operative abilities, thus making it difficult for the parent to brush the child’s teeth.
5. The child’s teeth are brushed less often than once a day.
6. The child was born prematurely with a very low birth weight of less than 3lbs.
7. The parent or caregiver has tooth decay.
8. The child has visible plaque, such as white or yellow deposits on the teeth.

*Source: Canadian Dental Association Position on Use of Fluorides in Caries Prevention*

about fifteen minutes, so doing dental work is always a challenge. If we can avoid that situation, that’s where we’d really like to be heading.” 🍏