

What is a space maintainer?

There have been many times when a child has needed extensive work on a baby tooth and their parents ask if we can just pull the tooth. “It just a baby tooth” they say. However it is more than just a baby tooth. It plays a vital and important role in maintaining space for the adult tooth which will eventually erupt and push the baby tooth out of the way. The consequences of losing a baby tooth or a deciduous tooth before the adult tooth or permanent tooth is ready to come out can be devastating leading to crowding, impacted teeth and a completely irregular bite and often affects the long term health of the other teeth in the mouth as well. When a baby tooth needs to be extracted or pulled due to decay, infection or fracture we need to preserve the space by placing a space maintainer until the permanent tooth finally erupts into the space.

Between the ages of about six and seven years, the primary teeth start to shed. The central and lateral incisors in the upper and lower jaws are usually the first to go. The first permanent teeth also start to erupt. These four molars (two in the upper jaw and two in the lower jaw) emerge behind the child’s existing primary teeth and do not involve the loss of baby teeth. Other permanent teeth, such as the incisors and canines and premolars, erupt into the gaps in the gum left by shed primary teeth. If this gap is lost then there is no room for the permanent tooth to erupt and they become impacted or get stuck beneath the bone.

The gap or space can be lost when the teeth behind the baby teeth move forward into the space which was being held open by the baby tooth. Once the back teeth move forward into this space then the permanent tooth which was supposed to move into that space cannot erupt. The result is crowding, an offset or crooked bite and impacted permanent teeth. In order to fix these results, expensive and long treatment involving braces and surgery is often required.

The timing for when the permanent teeth come through differs from one child to the next. Generally, the order of eruption and rough timeline for each type of permanent tooth includes: Central incisors – between six and eight years, Lateral incisors – between seven and eight years, Canine teeth – between nine and 13 years, Premolars – between nine and 13 years. If a child were to lose a baby molar, which holds the space for an adult premolar, at 8 years of age then a space maintainer would need to hold the space for 5 years until it is ready to erupt. The length of time a space maintainer is needed depends on the age of the child when the tooth is lost and when the adult tooth finishes developing and erupting into place.

A space maintainer is usually made by placing a metal band or cap around the tooth behind the lost tooth and placing a metal loop to hit the tooth in front of the space to keep the back tooth from moving forward.

Baby teeth are very important. In addition to holding or saving the space they are also needed to allow children to chew and speak. The best way to insure that no baby teeth are lost before their time is to see your dentist every 6 months, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that a child have their first visit at age one. This visit at age one is about educating you as parent as to what to do to keep your child in optimal oral health and to prevent problems in the future. It is important to clean infant mouths and gums regularly with a soft infant toothbrush or cloth and water, infants should be encouraged to drink from a cup as they approach their first birthday and should be weaned from the bottle by 12-14 months of age. Never allow child to go to sleep with the bottle as this can lead to baby bottle tooth decay. As they get older teeth should be brushed at least twice a day with an age-appropriate sized toothbrush using a very small “smear” of fluoridated toothpaste. Regular dental checkups and good home oral hygiene habits from an early age will help prevent the need for extensive dental care.

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