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## ASK THE EXPERTS



**Mark Waller, Ph.D.** is a Marriage and Family Therapist. His new book is, *The Dance of the Lion and the Unicorn: the Secret of Conscious Relationships* mail@markwaller.com.

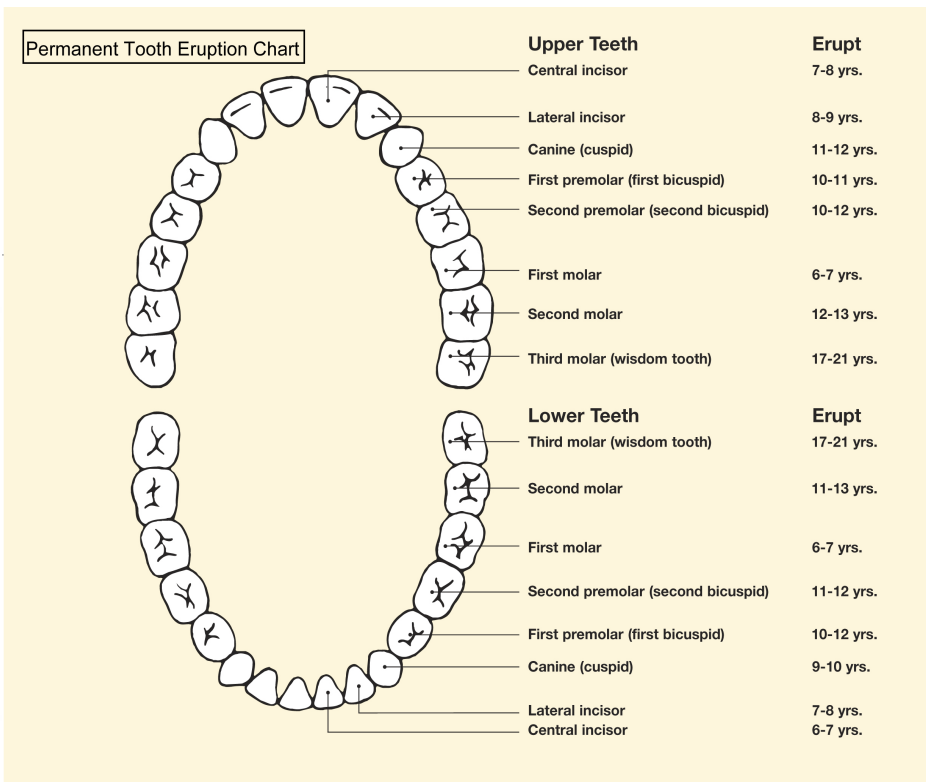


**Renee Raab Whitcombe** is the award-winning author of *LOOK WHO'S MOVING TO A NEW HOME*, a transition keepsake album for children. www.buddingfamily.com



**Dr. Keith S. Tang** is a Family Dentist in Irvine, CA and has been in private practice for over 14 years. He is a graduate of UCLA and a Fellow in the Academy of General Dentistry.

### Chart A



## TOOTHY DILEMMA

*My three-year-old son has a few cavities. But if my child's teeth are going to fall out soon, do I really need to get the cavities taken care of? —Toothy Dilemma*



In answering this question, let's look at when we can expect baby teeth to fall out (exfoliate) and what could happen if the cavities are not restored. The average age that each tooth is expected to exfoliate (See Chart A). Please note that typically the first baby tooth falls out around the age of six and the last tooth excluding the 3rd molars may not erupt until age 13. Therefore for a 3-year-

old, it is not likely that the teeth with cavities will exfoliate before other problems occur.

It is usually best to take care of a cavity in the early stages when a filling will suffice. If the decay is allowed to progress to the middle of the tooth where the nerve is located, pain or an acute infection with swelling may develop. While most children will request dental care by this stage requiring extraction of the infected tooth, some children with a high pain tolerance may ignore these signs until the nerve of the tooth completely dies and no longer produces pain. A chronic infection will then follow which could damage the developing permanent tooth either esthetically (producing white or brown spots) or functionally (with part of the tooth missing).

If a tooth is lost prematurely or a portion of tooth is missing due to a large cavity, the adjacent teeth may drift to fill the space. As a consequence, there may be insufficient space for the permanent tooth to erupt in the normal position. This is one of the indications for early orthodontic (braces) treatment. To prevent this problem from occurring, your dentist will likely prescribe a space maintainer if he has to extract a baby tooth before the permanent tooth is ready to erupt.

Research has also shown that a child with untreated cavities in his mouth will have more cavities in his permanent teeth. Cavities are caused primarily by bacteria called *Streptococcus Mutans*. These bacteria can be transferred directly to newly erupting permanent teeth if it is in direct contact, either adjacent to or opposing, a tooth with a large cavity. Using a toothbrush on a tooth with a large cavity can also transfer the bacteria on all other teeth that are brushed.

Healthy teeth are important to a child's development. If a child is missing teeth or has teeth with cavities, it is not likely that he will be able to enjoy eating many of the foods that are required for proper nutrition. This may in turn affect growth, immune function, brain development, and increase the chances of certain diseases. A child's speech development can also be influenced by his teeth. Without healthy teeth, a child may talk with a lisp or be more difficult to understand. As a final consideration, a child with unattractive or missing teeth is more likely to be teased which could affect his self-esteem and social development.

For older children (ages six and up), if the baby tooth is likely to be lost in the next few months and is not likely to cause damage to the permanent teeth. I would recommend allowing it to exfoliate on its own. The above problems would only be seen if dental disease is not treated within a reasonable period of time. Please see a dentist for regular check-ups and specific recommendations for your child.

—Dr. Keith S. Tang