

# profiles in parenting

## Loose Tooth Tales

Waiting for a wiggle is tough on kids  
by Ellen Scolnic

**W**hen my son, Michael, was in kindergarten, his teacher decorated the classroom with a big tooth-shaped chart. Each time a child lost a tooth, she would proudly inscribe his name on the poster. By the end of the year, everyone's name was up on the smiling molar — except for Michael's.

After your child waves good-bye to diapers and climbs on the big yellow school bus for the first time, he's on his way to another milestone of childhood — losing his first baby tooth. Most children begin to lose their baby teeth (primary teeth) around age 6, but for some kids, the first wiggle can come as early as 5 years old or as late as age 8.

Children stop losing baby teeth around age 12. Usually, the lower middle front incisor teeth fall out first, followed by the top two incisors. Last to go are the two sets of primary molars. And although there is really no way to predict when a child will lose her first tooth, it seems that primary teeth fall out in the same order they came in.

"When you see a little baby, 4 or 5 months old, with two cute teeth on the bottom, those will probably be the first to fall out for him around age 6," explains Dr. Jeffrey R. Blum, a pediatric dentist in Wynnewood.

### Little Teeth, Big Job

Although they may look tiny, baby teeth play a big role in helping kids learn to bite, chew food, speak and learn language. According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), primary teeth also encourage normal development of the jaw bone and facial muscles. They save space for the permanent teeth and help guide them into position. And their small size is just right for a child's small head.

But as baby teeth wear down on top, their roots are resorbed below the surface. The permanent teeth waiting behind them in the gums may start to erupt. This pushes the baby teeth, loosening their grip. After a few weeks of wiggle, the baby tooth almost always will exfoliate — dentist talk for "fall out" — on its own.

### Helping Hand

There's nothing wrong with a child — or parent — helping a dangling tooth fall out, Blum says. "When a tooth loosens up, it means it's ready to go. You can't pull a tooth that isn't ready to come out, unless you have your own dental extraction kit," he says. "When a tooth is loose, what generally happens is that the kid plays with it and plays with it, pokes it and wiggles it, and finally is so tired of having a loose tooth that he forgets about it and bites a cheeseburger — and the tooth pops out."

That's pretty much what happened to 10-year-old Esther Hoffman, of Wynnewood. "I'll always remember the time I lost a tooth eating popcorn," she says. "My tooth had been loose for such a long time, that when it finally fell out, I thought the tooth was a kernel of corn and I almost swallowed it!"

### Gone Too Soon

But if a baby tooth is lost too soon, knocked out by an accident or injury, the teeth beside it may drift to fill the space. According to the AAPD, when adjacent teeth move to fill another space, there may not be enough space in the right place. The permanent

### On Her Looks:

*"She has blonde hair, a blue dress and her wand is in the shape of a star. The Tooth Fairy is small, the size of a doll, but she is a real person. She has wings and she flies to all the children and gets their tooth from under their pillows and gives them money."* — Claire Lavelle, 5, of Bryn Mawr

*"She's like a princess, only different. She has a crown and a magic wand and wears purple and pink sparkles."* — Mira Leese, 4, of Wynnewood

### On the Act of Losing:

*"My funniest loose tooth was my canine because I lost it when my mouth collided with my dad's belly."* — Sebastian Milla, 10, of Wynnewood

### On Funds:

*"Once I lost a tooth, but I didn't tell my parents and I put it under my pillow. In the morning, I didn't get any money. But then I told my mom that I was putting a tooth under my pillow and guess what? The next morning, I got money. After that, they confessed."* — James Buckman, 10, of Penn Wynne

*"I lost seven teeth and gotten seven different amounts of money. The tooth fairy changes the money she pays every time."* — Miriam Weinstein, 7, of Wynnewood

*"If you have one tooth loose, you get \$1. If you lose two teeth, you get \$2. That's the way it works with the Tooth Fairy."* — Erica Smith, 6, of Ardmore

*"You only gave me \$1 for this tooth. Last time, you gave me \$10. Are we poor?"* — Then 8-year-old Morgan DeShields-McClure, of Philadelphia, asked of her mother, Kathryn. ☺

teeth may come in crooked or crowded. If the dentist may opt to put in a "space maintainer" appliance positioned to help steady the remaining teeth and hold them in the correct position until permanent teeth come in.

Once a child begins to lose baby teeth, the time between loose teeth. Sometimes, a child waits months waiting for the next loose tooth or waits months waiting for the permanent tooth to come in to fill the space in her mouth.

According to Blum, the process of getting a permanent tooth is a dynamic one. Just as children's mouths grow to grow and change, so do their teeth. Here's what happens in young mouths:

- ▶ After front incisors, permanent teeth come in, then molars.
- ▶ The first set of molars are 6-year-olds which may come in for some children even lose their first baby tooth.
- ▶ Then, the child will get 12 permanent molars.
- ▶ The last teeth are the third molars, often called wisdom teeth, which usually come in between 16 and 20 years old.
- ▶ Over time, 20 primary teeth will be replaced by 32 permanent teeth.

**Kids Say...  
Tooth Fairy Talk**

### Can't Say When

Dentists agree that the point at which a child loses her first tooth doesn't seem to be related to the timing of other aspects of body development. "I have lost teeth at a young age, but I'm not necessarily any taller or thinner than other children," says Dr. Blum. "I have some very big kids who still have all their baby teeth. It's very hard to predict when a child will start to lose teeth."

However, Blum says, when a child does lose a tooth, a growth spurt often follows.

"When Max — who is now 10 — was in kindergarten, he was one of the last ones to lose a tooth," recalls Lonnie Hovey, of Wynnewood. "We just kept hoping he would lose one. It's funny, because he didn't lose a tooth when all his friends had. His brother is now the same age Max was, and he's lost three teeth. Even siblings can be really different when it comes to losing teeth."

In some cases, a dentist may recommend a child get a better idea of what's going on below the surface if the child hasn't lost a tooth by age 8, an X-ray can help determine the position of the permanent teeth or if the roots of the primary teeth have been resorbed. If a tooth is pushed out of line or is slow to fall out, an X-ray can help determine if the permanent teeth are properly positioned.

### Don't fret

For a child waiting to lose his first tooth, joining the crowd of friends who have their names inscribed on the molar poster, Blum simply suggests assuring the child that the fall-out will come.

"Some kids do get anxious waiting for their first tooth. What we try to do in my office is to say, 'Uh-oh, Mom! It looks like this one is a little loose,'" Blum says. "And the parent will invariably say, 'Oh, news she's been waiting for.' It takes some of the pressure off the child. You don't want them to worry. It's just about being patient — which is hard for kids. There's no way to predict when teeth will fall out or to speed up the process. Sometimes I wish I had a magic wand that could make a tooth fall out, but I don't."

For some toothy children's texts, check out our website at [www.parents-express.net](http://www.parents-express.net).

