

Braces. Is your child ready for them?

Author: Alison Johnson



For many former metal mouths, brace faces, train trackers and zipper lips, visits to the orthodontist didn't begin until the teenage years. But times have changed: increasingly, orthodontists are evaluating younger kids and in some cases advising early work on baby teeth, hoping to lessen time in braces later.

Children usually don't get a full set of braces or clear plastic aligners until they have most or all of their permanent teeth, including 12-year molars. In fact, only about one in five kids needs orthodontic care of some kind before they're of middle-school age, says Dr. Todd Bivins, an orthodontist in Chesapeake.

But since every patient is different, the American Association of Orthodontists recommends that all kids have an initial consultation by age 7 - or whenever a parent has any questions or concerns. Most orthodontists offer those first appointments free of charge.

"We realize that this may seem young, but the focus is on prevention," Bivins says. "We recommend age 7 as a rule of thumb because at this time, the patient typically has a sufficient number of adult and baby teeth to make an accurate diagnosis as to what - if anything - they may need."

Many orthodontists and dentists offer more levels of care than in years past. Spacers, expanders, simple extractions and other fairly minor treatments can prevent the need for extensive tooth movement when a child is older, says Dr. William Harper, a family and cosmetic dentist in Poquoson.

"You might not need braces for as long, or you might not need to crank them as hard to get teeth where they need to be," Harper says. "That also can mean getting better long-term results because the harder you have to crank, the more likely teeth are to drift back toward their old positions over time."

Orthodontists look for four main problems in younger patients, Bivins says: overbites, underbites, severe tooth crowding and crossbites, or top teeth that fit inside bottom teeth in the front or back of the mouth. Quick intervention can make later treatment times "significantly shorter" and may allow kids to avoid future tooth extractions and even jaw surgery, he says.

"These are issues that if caught early are much easier and less invasive to correct at a young age, as opposed to waiting until all of the teeth come in," he says. "Essentially, we want to be more proactive than reactive."

Beyond significant bite or crowding issues - often obvious to parents - other signs that a child might benefit from an early consultation include:

- Tightly spaced baby teeth. First teeth should have spaces between them to allow bigger adult teeth to fit into their proper places.

- Early or late loss of baby teeth, especially if two teeth - baby and adult - are in the same space, which can be a sign of future crowding. If a child is missing teeth altogether, an X-ray can show if an adult tooth is beneath the gum line or if a dentist or orthodontist should preserve the space for an artificial tooth or implant down the road.

- Family history of braces. If one or both parents needed braces, the child likely will too. Other risk factors include any habit that involves continuously putting an object into the mouth, such as sucking a thumb, finger, pacifier or blanket.

- Difficulty with speaking, chewing and biting - including frequent biting of the inside of the mouth - as well as jaws that shift or make clicking sounds as they move. Kids also might grind or clench their teeth.

- "Mouth breathing" in children who have trouble breathing through their noses, sometimes because of allergies or ear or sinus problems. Over time, that can interfere with normal mouth and jaw development. A device called a palatal expander can widen the upper jaw and improve breathing capacity.

- A history of damage or trauma to front teeth, or chronic head, neck or jaw pain.

Treatment decisions will depend on each child's tooth and jaw development, the severity of a problem, a family's financial situation and a child's maturity level, which can help determine how well he or she will tolerate or comply with orthodontic care.

Financially, seeing an orthodontist sooner rather than later can offer advantages, Harper says. Parents can find out if their insurance covers treatments - some policies require a waiting period - and begin saving for what their child ideally needs, which might cost several thousand dollars. "Waiting until the last minute can compromise treatment and create a sudden financial burden that could have been planned for," Harper says.

Braces aren't just cosmetic: proper tooth and jaw alignment prevent numerous problems down the road, especially as people live longer. Teeth that aren't in the correct position will wear down and crack faster, requiring treatments such as crowns and root canals. Good alignment also helps with gum and bone health by allowing natural cleansing from the tongue, cheeks and lips.

Parents with kids much older than 7, though, have by no means missed the boat (some dentists, in fact, do still recommend waiting to see a specialist until a child has permanent teeth in most cases, with a single phase of treatment.). As Harper points out, it's never too late to consult an orthodontist or cosmetic dentist with concerns.

"I have patients in their 60s and 70s getting cosmetic procedures," he says. "Though confidence can be developed from many sources, it never hurts to have a great smile."

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