

## Child's First Dental Visit

We are often asked when should a child first see a dentist. I believe the right answer involves several factors. First and foremost is that it needs to be a positive experience for the child. Children of our adult patients may accompany them to the office early on to get a feel for the office and see that what's being done with mom or dad is OK and a normal thing to do. Children are quite unique in their development – emotionally and physically, so there is no exact pat time for the first visit with all that we do in assessing the child's oral system. Between the ages of three and four, all of the primary teeth have come into the mouth. The child's dental examination would consist of several things. A pH test is performed to assess whether the child's oral cavity has an acidic, neutral or alkaline oral environment. Oral bacteria involved in both tooth decay and gum inflammation thrive in an acidic environment, so we recommend protocols to develop a neutral or slightly alkaline oral pH. If bacterial plaque is present we may disclose it with a dye that colors only the plaque, not the tooth structure. This is most often an eye-opener for parents as plaque is virtually invisible without it. Proper self-care coaching is performed to show the mother and child how to remove the dye soaked plaque as part of the self-care coaching to develop healthy lifetime habits. The teeth are examined for decay visually along with bite wing x-rays if the child is cooperative. They show cavities in-between teeth that cannot be seen visibly unless they are quite large. Also quite important is assessing the child's occlusion, or the way the teeth fit together and their relationship with the jaw joints. This is important not only for a future nice smile, but functionally as well. Teeth that don't fit together properly can cause tooth wear and headache symptoms, even at an early age. So, depending upon the emotional maturity of the child, the first visit may include simply riding up and down in the chair and "counting the teeth." The most important thing is that the dental visit should be seen by the child as a positive thing and we won't bend that rule just to get everything done at once. If we make the first visit a positive one, even if "incomplete," we will be making sure that the next one will be a winner to pave the way for a future of optimum health.