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Loss of first baby tooth a positive experience for children

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Scared, ashamed, happy or proud -- how do children feel when they lose their first baby tooth? An interdisciplinary research group at the University of Zurich has now found that children's feelings are predominantly positive. The study also reveals that previous visits to the dentist's as well as parental background and level of education affect how children experience the loss of their first tooth.

Deciduous teeth, more commonly known as milk or baby teeth, are the first set of teeth that develop in children. These teeth usually fall out and are replaced by permanent teeth. Children generally lose their first baby tooth when they're about six years old: The tooth comes loose and eventually falls out, leaving a gap which is then permanently filled by its replacement tooth. This gradual process is probably one of the first biological changes to their own bodies that children experience consciously. The emotions that accompany this milestone are extremely varied, ranging from joy at having finally joined the world of grown-ups to fear about the loss of a body part.

### **Parents report positive reactions**

An interdisciplinary team of dental researchers and developmental and health

psychologists at the University of Zurich, in cooperation with the City of Zurich's School Dental Services, has now examined the feelings that children experience when they lose their first baby tooth, and which factors are at play. The scientists surveyed parents of children who had already lost at least one of their milk teeth. Of the nearly 1,300 responses received for the study, around 80 percent of parents reported positive feelings, while only 20 percent told of negative emotions. Raphael Patcas, first author of the study, is happy with the findings: "The fact that four out of five children experience the loss of a baby tooth as something positive is reassuring, for parents and dentists alike."

### **The longer it's loose, the better the feelings**

The researchers found that previous visits to dentists played a role when it comes to children's feelings. Children whose previous visits were cavity-related and thus perhaps associated with shame or guilt experienced fewer positive emotions when they later lost their first baby tooth. If, however, previous dental appointments were the result of an accident, and thus an abrupt, unexpected and painful event, then the loss of the first milk tooth was more likely to be associated with positive emotions. According to dental researcher Raphael Patcas, one possible explanation for this is that baby teeth loosen gradually before falling out -- a process that, unlike an accident, unfolds slowly and predictably. This is also supported by the fact that children who experience the loosening of their tooth over an extended period of time tend to have more positive feelings: The longer the preparation and waiting time, the greater the relief and pride when the tooth finally falls out.

### **Parental education and background matter**

Moreover, the study also found that sociodemographic factors are related to children's feelings: For example, children were more likely to have positive feelings such as pride or joy if the parents had a higher level of education and came from non-Western countries. The researchers indicate that cultural differences could be at play here: These include education style and norms that parents pass on to their children, as well as transitioning rituals that accompany the loss of the first baby tooth.

"Our findings suggest that children deliberately process previous experiences concerning their teeth and integrate them in their emotional development," says Moritz Daum, UZH professor of developmental psychology. This finding is important for dentists and parents alike: "Especially where cavities are concerned, it's worth communicating with children prudently," says Daum. "This way, emotions in connection with teeth and dentists can be put on the most positive trajectory possible."

