Majority of children perceive loss of first tooth positively

By Dental Tribune International

ZURICH, Switzerland: Although losing primary teeth can be unsettling and painful for children, an interdisciplinary research group at the University of Zurich (UZH) has now found that children’s feelings toward this experience are predominantly positive. The study also established that previous visits to the dentist, as well as parental background and level of education, affect how children experience the loss of their first tooth.

Children generally lose their first primary tooth when they are about 6 years old. 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.

An interdisciplinary team of researchers at UZH, in cooperation with the City of Zurich’s school dental services, has examined the feelings that children experience when they lose their first primary tooth and what factors play a role. The scientists surveyed parents of children who had already lost at least one of their primary teeth. Of the nearly 1,300 responses received, around 80 per cent of parents reported positive feelings, while only 20 per cent told of negative emotions.

The researchers found that previous visits to the dentist played a role regarding children’s feelings. Those whose previous visits were cavity-related and thus perhaps associated with shame or guilt experienced fewer positive emotions when they lost their first primary tooth. If, however, previous dental appointments were the result of an accident, and thus an abrupt, unexpected and painful event, the loss of the first primary tooth was more likely to be associated with positive emotions. According to lead author Dr Raphael Patcas, from the Clinic of Orthodontics and Paediatrics Dentistry, one possible explanation for this is that primary teeth loosen gradually before falling out—a process that, unlike an accident, unfolds slowly and predictably. This is also supported by the finding that children who experience the loosening of a tooth over an extended period 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.

Moreover, the study found that socio-demographic factors are related to children’s feelings. For example, children were more likely to have positive feelings such as pride or joy if their 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,” said study co-author Prof Moritz Daum, from the institute of developmental psychology at the university. This finding is important for dentists and parents alike: “Especially where cavities are concerned, it’s worth communicating with children prudently,” added Daum. “This way, emotions in connection with teeth and dentists can be put on the most positive trajectory possible.”

The study, titled “Emotions experienced during the shedding of the first primary tooth,” was published online on 15 September 2018 in the International Journal of Paediatric Dentistry ahead of inclusion in an issue.

Researchers from the University of Zurich have found that children mostly experience the loss of their first primary tooth as something positive. (Photograph: Nenad Nedomack/Shutterstock)