

## Tooth Fairy: A Popular Legend

A baby's first tooth erupts between six and ten months of age. Often it's a memorable occasion, photographed and noted in a baby book. The first of 20 baby teeth that come in are typically the front two lower teeth, followed by the front two upper teeth. By the child's sixth or seventh birthday, the first tooth becomes loose. After days or weeks of gently playing the tongue against a loose tooth, it eventually comes out. Then in many homes, the anticipation for a Tooth Fairy visit begins.

### An Ancient Rite

The Tooth Fairy is a symbol of an age-old rite of passage that marks a child's transition from infant to adolescent. The Tooth Fairy is also a link to ancient ceremonies of life, death and rebirth. The rite of exchanging a baby tooth for something better marks not only the physiological passage to adolescence, it also signifies the sociological passage from home to the new arena of school. Eventually it marks a psychological passage when the child sees the Tooth Fairy from an adult perspective.

### Fact or Fiction?

The Tooth Fairy is an example of folklore or myth, something that adults present to children as real, but which is, of course, make believe. Many families participate in the roles of this myth even after the children become aware of the fiction of the supposed supernatural entity, as a form of play or tradition.

### Tooth Customs Around the World

- Cultural historians say that in addition to serving as a rite of passage, superstition has always surrounded teeth. These valuable tokens were often used to ward off negativity, witches or demons. **Vikings** were even supposed to give kids a "tooth fee" for using children's teeth.

- The idea of a fairy is tradition in many homes across **America**, **Austria** and **Denmark**. The Tooth Fairy calls upon the European folklore of elves or brownies who will often perform useful tasks or exchange valuable treasures for things humans view as mundane or useless. When a child loses a tooth it is placed under their pillow. Sometime during the night the Tooth Fairy visits takes the tooth and leaves money or a small gift.
- Animals take the place of the fairy in several countries. In **Argentina** and **Sweden**, a child places his or her tooth in a glass of water. Overnight a Magical Mouse drinks the water, takes the tooth and leaves money. **Philippine** children leave their teeth on the windowsill for the Tooth Rat. The next morning, the tooth is gone and the Tooth Rat has left them money. Other countries like **Columbia** and **South Africa** leave the tooth under their pillow or put it in a slipper and wait for a mouse to take the tooth and leave money or a gift.
- In **Guatemala**, **Haiti** and **Brazil** children are instructed to throw their teeth on the roof. Additional rituals include chants asking for a new healthy tooth.

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- In African countries such as **Nigeria** and **Benin** there are a variety of tooth customs. Boys hold their tooth in a fist with 8 other small stones, for a total of 9, (girls hold 6 stones). The child is instructed to close their eyes tightly, shout their name and the words “I want my tooth back” and then run away, while other children are instructed to bury the tooth in the ground. If a lizard sees the tooth, a new one will not grow, so it is important to keep the tooth hidden.
- In **Chile** and **Costa Rica**, the child gives the tooth to their mother to make a charm which she then gives back to the child.
- Many countries advise children to leave the tooth in particular places. Kids in **China** and **Thailand** place lower teeth on the roof, and the top teeth at the foot of the bed or under the bed, while kids from **Russia** bury their teeth. Other countries like **Taiwan** and **Greece** instruct their children to throw their tooth on the roof for good luck.

### A Learning Opportunity

While family traditions can be fun and imaginative, good oral health is more than making a wish for strong and healthy teeth. Whether the legend involves a Tooth Rat or a Tooth Fairy, losing deciduous (baby) teeth is a rite of passage in many households and presents a great opportunity for parents to talk with their children about practicing good dental health habits. Some parents even use the legend to encourage regular brushing and flossing by saying that the cleanest and healthiest teeth go to the Tooth Hall of Fame!

### First Dental Visit

The American Dental Association recommends that parents take their children to the dentist by age one for their first dental health assessment. For continued dental care, it is important for parents to know that the frequency of dental visits needs to be determined by the dentist, based on an assessment of the child’s unique oral health needs — rather than on a pre-set schedule.

This approach ensures your child receives the most appropriate, timely care.

**Sources:** American Dental Association; Beeler, Selby, *Throw Your Tooth on the Roof: Tooth Traditions from Around the World*; Wikipedia