

Children in
your dental
practice



Ethos of treating children in your dental practice

Believe each child will have an ideal visit each time he or she comes to see you. When the mindset is positive and everyone's belief system is based on the conviction that the outcome for the patient will be both successful and safe, treatment of the young patient becomes not only simple, but also gratifying far beyond the remarkable fiscal rewards that accompany the care.

The First Visit

- When should a child see a dentist for the first time?
 - Opinions vary between from birth to when they have teeth to not until they are two-years-old. There is no hard-and-fast rule or even guidance it seems. However, experience has shown that children who regularly visit a dental practice from an early age develop a very positive attitude towards their own dental care and to dentistry in general. Early-age dental visits for a child helps them become accustomed to the sights, sounds and smells of a dental practice, and helps eradicate any fear they may possibly have.

A Child patient has Dental Anxiety? Here's What You Should Do

It's perfectly normal to have fears, especially for children. Some fears come stem from drastic changes, being separated from their parents, or even the scary monster in the closet. Although many kids will grow out of their fear as they mature, teaching them to cope while they're young can sometimes be difficult.

One fairly common and difficult fear that some parents face is when their child is terrified of going to the dentist, also called dental phobia or anxiety.

Believe it or not, almost 20% of school age children are afraid of visiting the dentist. Unfortunately, this issue makes things difficult for the parents and technicians trying to help the child. Even worse, the anxiety can be detrimental to the child's oral health when it prevents them from receiving necessary dental care.

So what can you do to get them past this anxiety?

Parent's Role

Before the visit:

- Tell your child in advance that they have a dental visit.
- Children need predictability in their life in order to adjust and transition into unfamiliar situations. Waiting until the last moment to tell your child about their dental visit can worsen their anxiety. They will need as much time as possible in order to mentally prepare for their visit to the dentist. During that time, you can also begin to help them through their dental phobia. Let them express their fears to you as the day of their appointment draws closer.
- Answer their questions with straightforward, to-the-point responses. Be sure to limit the amount of details given, and remind them that they can ask the dentist questions too. Dental professionals are trained to describe procedures to children in nonthreatening ways.
- Communication with your child is key. Talk to them about the importance of maintaining healthy teeth and gums. Explain that the dentist is a friendly doctor who helps take care of their mouth, keeping them safe and healthy.
- Inform your dentist beforehand. Making your dentist aware of your child's dental phobia ahead of time will help them be prepared for the visit.

Dentist's Role with Parent

Before the Visit:

- Explain your philosophy in specific terms, including the management tools you will employ in treating the child, the child-friendly terminology you will use, and the role you expect the parents to play in the appointments.
- When the parents accompany the child into the treatment room, tell them up-front that it is important for you put your entire attention on the child. Tell them you expect the child to listen to you and not to the parents. In support of this, the parents must be informed that they are not to speak to the child.
- Ask the parents for their support of the practice's terminology. Give them a sheet with sample words so that they will not inadvertently frighten their child with words or phrases like shot, drill, yank a tooth, or other negative images.
- Advise the parents to not prepare the child for the restorative visit. Explain to the parent that you will prepare the child literally on the spot. Make direct eye contact with the child, explaining that during your examination you found "x" number of "sugar bugs" and that you will make them go away at the next appointment. Then ask the child if she can help you at that visit in the same way she did for the checkup. In virtually every case, the child will agree to this. Then tell the parent that the preparation is complete.
- Be realistic about your expectations about the child's next visit. If you believe that the child will not handle the visit easily, it is unwise to tell the parent that you expect everything to go smoothly. Parents know their children better than you do and most come into the dental setting with low expectations about how the child will do. You are far better off being clear and honest.

Parent's Role

During the Visit:

- Ask your dentist for advice, and follow the their instructions. Dental professionals are trained in the ways of dental care and also dealing with a variety of patients. Ask them what you can do to put your child at ease, and follow their instructions during the visit.
- Have your child's favorite toy ready. A toy can be a helpful and calming distraction for your child during the visit. You can let them play while in the waiting room as they adjust to the new environment. Though not all toys are suitable for when they're in the dental chair, your child may be allowed to have small simple toys during the procedure. (Just be sure to ask your dentist for permission.)
- Stay calm, always. It can be difficult to stay calm while your child is having a tantrum or has anxiety at their dental appointment. Remind yourself to remain collected and to speak gently to you child. Having a soothing demeanor will make them feel safer and at ease.

Tricks of the trade

Use terminology that is age-appropriate and positive

- We don't give "shots," we "put teeth to sleep." Create a bond of trust when our description matches the experience. When we tell a child her lip will start feeling fat and then it does, the child learns that she can trust us.

Explain everything

- One of the most effective distraction techniques is to provide a running commentary to the child so that nothing comes as a surprise. By telling the patients (in simple, understandable words) what is happening, they can anticipate the next instrument, sensation, or procedure with minimal anxiety.

Focus on what is going well

- Don't be phony about it and don't sugar-coat it, but keep your attention on the aspects of the appointment that are working. Be specific in your feedback to the child.
- Avoid general statements like, "You're being a good helper" because the child may not even understand what she is doing right. Be clear by saying, "It is very helpful when you hold your mouth open because I can see better," or "When you keep your head still like that, I can work more quickly." This provides definite teaching to the child so that she will better know how to help you.

Tricks of the trade

Keep appointments short

- This is somewhat dependent on age, but we rarely have restorative visits that are longer than 45 minutes to an hour unless they are accompanied by sedation.

Avoid pain

- While some dentists often treat primary teeth without local anesthetic, we recommend using it for a number of reasons.
 - We do not know ahead of time whether or not the child will experience discomfort with a "routine" procedure.
 - You might want to consider using topical anesthetics and nitrous oxide when indicated to ease the injection process.

Use rubber dams routinely

- This affords a better view, keeps debris from falling into the child's mouth and provides a more controlled field in which to place the compomer materials that we use for primary posterior teeth.
- When doing primary root canals (pulpectomies) and/or stainless steel crowns, it also affords us the safety of nothing being dropped into patients' mouths and potentially being aspirated.
- Having the appropriate clamps is essential for successful dam placement and retention.

Dentist's Role

- **Distract them from the dental procedure**
 - Put a television above the chair that includes a variety of kid-friendly shows or channels. This will help pull the child's mind away from the procedure or check-up.
- **Give the child control over the procedure**
 - Tell the child that they can raise their hand anytime they want you to stop. This is important, because if the child begins to feel uncomfortable in the chair or scared, you want to give them an opportunity to tell you so that you can correct the situation, or give them a small break.
- **Reward the child after the procedure**
 - Let them choose from a variety of fun toothbrushes after their cleaning. Consider having a box of small trinkets and let each child pick a toy. If they have no cavities, give them a chance to win an even bigger prize with a "no-cavity raffle."

Dentist's Role

- **Speak in a kind voice and use simple words**
 - Talking in a friendly and regulated voice tone only when necessary will help put your child at ease. Using simple words to explain procedures is also beneficial. Sometimes, a dentist will use a doll or another person to demonstrate a procedure before they perform it.
- **Engage the child in conversation**
 - Engagement is an extremely helpful tool to help your child overcome dental anxiety. Giving the child a task such as doing mental math or naming their favorite foods can keep them pleasantly distracted. Dentists can tell stories and engage them in a conversation. That way, attention is drawn away from the procedure. That will also help the child to feel more comfortable around the dental professional.
 - Crouch down and meet the child eye to eye when you talk to them. Smile, and explain what you'll be doing directly to them in kid-friendly terms.
 - Have them do deep breathing exercises. If a child seems anxious, guide them through a few deep breaths in and out while sitting in the chair. Or, invest in some guided imagery designed for children and give the child a pair of headphones and a listening device.
- **Use positive reinforcement**
 - Compliments and praise work as effective reinforcements for children. Applauding them for their bravery and good behavior during a dental visit can make a world of difference.

Nothing is working! What do I do?

- **Conscious Sedation**

- When nothing seems to be helping your child deal with their dental anxiety, there is another harmless option: Laughing gas. Using a safe and effective sedative will help keep your child calm during a dental procedure. Sedation dentistry is used for both kids and adults and is given as a controlled anti-anxiety medication. Most of the time, conscious sedation is enough to help the patient cope with the procedure. This kind of method allows the child to remain relaxed during the procedure. During this kind of sedation, they are still able to respond to verbal and physical stimuli. They can also breathe normally without any medical assistance. Afterward, the child will probably have no recollection of the procedure and will function normally by the next day.
- For their patients' safety, dentists and their assistants are certified to administer such drugs and have a qualified staff member to monitor vital signs of the patient during sedation. Different levels of sedation are achieved by different medications to bring on mild, moderate, or deep sedation. Medications such as Hydroxyzine or Midazolam can be taken orally for a milder sedation. Intravenous (IV) drugs are used for deeper levels of sedation.

- **Advise therapy**

- Sometimes it's necessary to seek professional help for your child's anxiety. Different therapeutic treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy or psychotherapy are worth trying. Doing so will allow your child to overcome their fears so they can receive proper dental treatment to keep their teeth and gums healthy.

Reference:

- <https://www.carefreedental.com/resources/19-dentistry-for-kids/161-your-child-has-dental-anxiety-here-s-what-you-should-do>
- <https://www.dentalvibe.com/blog/6-tips-for-making-your-dental-practice-kid-friendly/>
- <https://www.dentistryiq.com/dentistry/pediatric-dentistry/article/16348530/the-reality-of-working-with-kids>
- <https://www.nature.com/articles/bdjteam2016119>

Questions

1. Link to questions:

<https://forms.gle/K4bBNegfggxAP3eG7>

2 CPD points will be awarded for passing the questionnaire

Pass mark of 70% required

Register via the link with your name, surname, email address and HPCSA number.