

7 Smart Tips for Your Child's First Dental Visit

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If you have a young child you will at some point look at that beautiful face and wonder when you should be making a dental visit. It's a question that every parent, and especially mothers, are faced with at one time or another. While we know that taking our child to the dentist is a necessity, we still may not know more beyond that. And that's okay! As all parents know, babies are not born with an instruction manual. We learn things as we go along and sometimes by trial and error.


Path to Success

Getting your child down the path of good dental health is a gift. When it comes to the teeth, healthy habits are ones that will impact an entire childhood. Healthy happy smiles help to make children more comfortable, confident, and outgoing. They tend to smile more, will feel

comfortable laughing, and are usually more confident when it comes to speaking with others, especially their peers in the classroom. And as a bonus, the healthy dental habits that children learn growing up will usually stay with them throughout their adulthood.

Healthy oral habits into adulthood can make a world of difference when it comes to an adult's personal and social life, as well as their overall health, because oral hygiene has been linked to everything from heart health to infection resistance. Many health professionals feel that oral health provides a snapshot of someone's overall health. Yes, it's that important.

Armed with this information the last thing you want to do is shy away and feel overwhelmed by it all. Quite the contrary. If you have a child, and especially if you have a baby, now is the time to start



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mapping out their oral health success plan. Believe it or not, your child's oral health success starts with you!

First Visit Success

If you are not sure where to start when it comes to your child's first pediatric dental visit you are not alone. In fact, that's perfectly normal. Luckily, however, there are plenty of things you can do in order to prepare. The more prepared you are, the more relaxed you will be, and the more successful your experience is bound to be. As with most things life, preparation is key, even when it comes to a pediatric dental visit.

Many parents are searching for answers on how to make it a smooth and comfortable experience for their child. Here are 7 smart tips for your child's first dental visit, all of which will help make it a great experience:

1. Don't wait for problems to arise

A big mistake that many well intentioned parents make is to hold off on taking their child to dentist until there is a problem. The problems may come at 6:00 in the

evening on a Sunday in the form of pain. There is no way to know when that problem will arise, what it will entail, and how you will go about addressing it for your child who is

uncomfortable. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, as well as the American Academy of Pediatrics, both recommend that the first dental visit should take place by the time the child is one year old, once their first tooth has erupted, or whichever one takes place first. Prevention is the first line of defense when it comes to a healthy mouth. Taking your child this young to the dentist is the most effective way to ensure their oral health is off to a great start. The dentist can evaluate to begin noticing any problems, and addressing them, that could become an issue later on. Once your child has their first appointment, then you want to continue with a visit every six months on a regular schedule. This provides the most effective way to help your child get the best start, identify any problems, and keep their teeth and gums in good condition. More resources are available at the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry website. Visit www.aapd.org for more information on the best timing for your visit to the pediatric dentist.



2. Avoid being dramatic or overly excited.

If you are a parent who fears the dentist, and many of you do, then there is a chance you may pass those fears on to your children. You may not intend to do it, but yet it can still happen. Many parents have fears from their own dental experiences growing up and they say things to their children that have them scared before they ever step foot in the office. For the sake of your child's comfort and oral health you have to make an effort to watch what you say about the dentist. Not just when it comes to talking to your child about their appointment, but in your home in general. Kids listen, even when we think they are not, and they will hear those words, internalize those fears, and their oral health may suffer as result of the fear and avoidance that builds up. In preparing your child for their dental

appointment avoid being dramatic, saying things that will scare them, or being overly excited about it. Whatever you do, avoid using words like "pain," "drilling," "shots," or "hurt," when discussing the dentist. Just make it a matter of fact type of thing and make it seem like a simple appointment. Let your child know that the dentist may want to see how their teeth look, count them, and maybe even take some pictures of them. You can even do a little role playing to demonstrate what the dentist may do, so that your child feels more comfortable when the appointment time arrives. But it's best to avoid making it seem like the dental appointment is a big deal. It's important to remember that today's dental practices have come a long way since you were a child. They are not as scary today and a lot of measures have been taken to make things more comfortable and fun for children.

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3. Be prepared, but stay strong

Children cry. They also whine. This especially happens when they are doing something unfamiliar to them or if it's something they don't want to do. It's just how they communicate. But often times they are overreacting to something and using that angle because they know parents react to it in a big way. When you take your child to their first dental visit know that there is a chance you will hear some whining and maybe even some crying. Be prepared for this, but don't let it get to you. This is a time for you to be strong and remind yourself that you are doing something good for your child. Kids don't always understand that being at appointment like this is something good and will help them live a healthier life. What you want to do is take a completely supportive angle. Let your child know the dentist is trusted and beyond just saying that, demonstrate it. Children are watching your reaction when the dentist walks into the room. Play it cool, calm, and show your child that you respect and trust the dentist. During the appointment give reinforcing words that your child is doing a good job. If

there is something that leads your child to cry during the appointment hold back and let the dentist address it. They tend to know how to handle the situations and it won't be the first or last time that they get a chance to rise to the challenge and help calm a child's dental fears. If you handle those fears the child will still most likely fear the dentist. But if the dentist gets the opportunity to address the issue and build some trust with your child it can open some doors that lead them both down the right path.

4. Forget surprises

Have you been thinking about taking your child out of the house and just making a surprise stop off at the dentist? Don't. It's not a good idea to surprise them with something so different that they have never experienced before. Those surprises are better left to an unexpected visit to the park. When it comes to taking your child to the pediatric dentist, forget the surprises. Instead, during the few weeks leading up to it, talk about the appointment to your child.

Discuss with them that they have a fun trip to the dentist coming up. Play dentist and let your child be the patient while you look into their mouth and help clean their teeth. Reverse roles and let them play dentist and look into yours. Check with your local library to see what type of dentist related materials you could check out to help introduce your child to the idea of visiting the dentist. Doing a quick Google search online for dentist visit books will yield a list of results. You can also find movies that cover the topic, including ones like “The Berenstain Bears Visit the Dentist.” The American Dental Association has a Website, called Mouth Healthy Kids, dedicated to helping kids with this issue. They offer online videos, including those by Sesame Street, games and quizzes, activity sheets, and more. Gather some of these helpful tools and spend a couple of weeks prior to the first dental visit introducing them to your child. The extra preparation here is going to really pay off the day of the appointment. You will be patting yourself on the back for having taken the time to do these things.

5. Avoid sweet bribes

It may seem sweet to bribe your child with things like toys and treats to go to the dentist. Many parents give it a try, not realizing that it sets up a pattern that they will not care for later on. Avoid the sugary treats and toys and opt for other forms of positive reinforcement. It's okay to provide your child with some positive reinforcement for doing a good job at their dentist visit, but by try to make it more along the lines of it being a hug, high-five, or some stickers. When you promise candy or a trip to the toy store in exchange for their good behavior at the dentist office you are not bound to actually see a dramatic turnaround in their behavior. And you will be setting yourself up to continuously provide such bribes whenever they have new experiences in life. It's better to help guide them through the experience, let them gain the confidence that comes as a result, and then give them some positive feedback to reinforce their behavior.

6. The “Happy Visit”


With anything new it's best to really start off with the basics and build up to more complex tasks. As a hockey

coach I love to see kids get comfortable with a basic fundamental skills first (like skating) then move up to more complex tasks, like skating with a stick and puck.

It's no different with kids and their first dental visit. We like to get them familiar with their surroundings, give them a ride up and down the chair and give them a fun reward from the “treasure chest.” This often leaves a great positive first impression with a feeling of excitement. We call this a “Happy Visit” because nothing is forced and everyone leaves happy!

After the ride in the chair and a fun introduction, some children at this point and time are fine getting a dental checkup (counting and checking their teeth and mouth) and if appropriate a cleaning and x-rays. With other more apprehensive children, it's best to work up to it!

Having three boys with very different personalities I can appreciate the differences in how they handle new experience. Truly one size does not fit all, but being prepared to introduce them to the dentist in a controlled, comfortable fashion has worked very well for the children we've treated over the years, and once good experiences have been established it's much easier to continue to have positive dental visits for years to come.



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7. Reinforce oral health commitments

You will most likely be surprised at how much you learn from the dentist. They are a wealth of information when it comes to caring for your child's teeth and ensuring their health. Take what you learn and the advice you receive from the dentist to heart. They can provide you with many tips that help keep your child's teeth healthy, including dietary recommendations, brushing and follow-up care instructions, and numerous things that you can do in order to reinforce oral health commitments at home. They can also help provide you information and guidance when it comes to common childhood oral concerns, such as thumb sucking, bottle usage, braces, protecting teeth from injury, and more. Be sure to take any questions with



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you that you may have, and don't be afraid to ask them. They will be pleased that you care so much about helping your child to protect their teeth.

Getting Started

Your child's first dental visit is not nearly as overwhelming as it may seem now. Kids take more patience, every parent knows that, making it essential that a dentist that you chose is great working with kids.

When you make your child's first appointment it is also a good idea to consider the time of day you make it for. Give some thought to the best time of day for your child and then try to make it for that time. In other words, if you know your child is tired and likes to nap every afternoon, you don't want that to be the time you make an appointment. That would just make for a more challenging appointment and potentially a bad experience, simply because it was nap time. Keep it easier on you and your child by

opting for a morning appointment, if possible, so they are bright eyed and ready to take on the challenges of the day.

Every child needs to have their first dental visit. Every parent is faced with how to ensure that it's a success. By doing so, parents will help get their child off to a great start and can help provide them with oral health habits and benefits that last a lifetime!

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