

“Easing Dental Anxiety in Kids and Parents,” by Bridgette Springer for *Portsmouth New Hampshire Magazine*.

The saying, “It’s like trying to pull teeth,” is a pretty accurate description when it comes to getting kids to do tasks such as clean their room or eat their vegetables. Yet, for some it can be even more aptly used to describe getting a child to actually sit in the dentist chair because of the fear they might well, get their teeth pulled, or some other horrible procedure could take place. Most kids however consider a dentist visit to be routine, but for some it can be a horror show both for the child and the parent trying to calm the situation. If you face these challenges every time the appointment card comes in the mail, fear not, as there are proven strategies you can practice before matters get out of hand and your child grows into an adult who cringes at the thought of the dentist’s drill.

The Importance of Healthy Teeth

The American Academy for Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recommends all children see a dentist for an evaluation and initial cleaning at age one. Maintaining a healthy smile is not only critical to reducing cavities and tooth decay, but essential to your overall health. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), “Untreated tooth decay causes pain and infections that may lead to problems; such as eating, speaking, playing, and learning.” So, for these key reasons, kids should see the dentist every six months for a cleaning to establish a baseline of their dental health, establish good habits, and prevent costly procedures in the future.

Easing Anxiety at the Dentist

If only it were that easy for everyone however. Mom Trish remembers the early days of taking her daughter to the dentist all too well. Referring to the experience, Trish said, “My daughter HATED the dentist from day one (age three) I would literally have to sit on her to have them clean her teeth. She never experienced anything painful from the dentist or hygienist, however she was scared to death and would look at me with the, ‘Mom, don’t do this,’ eyes.”

And Trish’s story is the just the beginning, I polled many people who said going to the dentist was a traumatic experience. Mom Robin’s daughter had her first dentist visit at 18 months after a fall at the playground when she lost her first tooth. Ironically, another tooth got knocked out by her little brother at age four. Losing teeth early meant seeing the dentist at a young age and her daughter associated pain with the visits. In order to get her daughter to cooperate, Robin’s dentist gave her some suggestions to help make the appointments go more smoothly. These included:

- Tell your child about the visit the day prior to the appointment. Talking about the dentist several weeks before the big day only raises the anxiety level.
- Don’t mention words like needles, shots, and hurt. For example avoid saying, “The Novocain will not be any worse than a flu shot, OR it should not hurt much,” as those words create more anxiety.

- If the visit is for a procedure other than a cleaning, try telling the child that he/she just needs some boo-boos in their mouth worked on and they need to be a big kid and open real wide. In other words, the less detail, the better.
- Try offering a small reward ahead of time by explaining if the child does a good job and cooperates, they can pick out something fun to do after the appointment.

Mom Beth tries scheduling her youngest son's appointment after his big brother's so he has a chance to watch and see everything that is being done and will soon happen at his own cleaning. This worked for her and her son developed an instant comfort level. "The sticker and new toothbrush helped too!" said Beth.

Another tip is finding a dentist that specializes in pediatrics. Walking into the Portsmouth Pediatric Dentistry offices on Griffin Road in Portsmouth, one can't help but feel at ease. The gigantic fish tank easily distracts the kids and so too do the wall puzzles, games, and carnival mirror that distorts your height. The kids get to wear cool sunglasses to shield them from the bright lights, and the entire team nurtures the kids by explaining exactly what they are doing. The best part is when the kids get to pick their fluoride treatment flavor ranging from berry to bubblegum.

After two years of seeing a family dentist, Trish decided to take her daughter to Core Pediatric Dentistry in Exeter. The staff eased her daughter's anxiety by having her come in once a week for four weeks. Appointments were brief and were used to familiarize her daughter with the environment which included touring the office with the dental assistant. "Sometimes she sat in the dental chair, sometimes she played with tools," said Trish. The point was to get her excited about her next visit and the conversations put her daughter in a positive mood. "After four visits, (yes it was time consuming but worth it), she was able to sit and let them clean her teeth without me sitting on her!"

Dental hygienist Richard Gouin with Core Pediatric Dentistry reminds parents not to mention anything about their own dental experiences, and not to use words like sharp, needle, and pain. According to Gouin, a child who fears a dental visit may have had a previous bad experience with a doctor visit and associate anyone in a white lab coat as a pain giver. Also, some parents inadvertently get their kids worked up, so definitely try to stay positive and make the visit fun and routine.

If the calming strategies just don't work, nitrous oxide can also be used to take away the fear by making the patient feel very relaxed. "We work with them at their pace, make it fun and can turn on the TV for distraction. We try to keep it a fun, happy environment so they feel safe there," said Gouin.

For complete list of pediatric dentists by region visit the AAPD website at www.aapd.org/finddentis.