

## Making your child's first dental visit a happy experience



**By Dan Naumovich**

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A cold, sterile room with blinding lights. Squealing drills and long, sharp needles. A large man with hairy knuckles, smiling sinisterly as he says, “Open wide!”

It wasn’t long ago that such horror stories were common among children who feared their first trip to the dentist’s office. Dentists have worked hard to change that perception.

“They spend so much time in dental school preparing you to avoid that stereotype,” said Dr. Don Staten. “You have to be a communicator.”

Staten said that for cleanings and checkups, the vast majority of kids do fine. But there still is some fear of the unknown, whether it’s a first appointment or a first filling.

Parents can help put their children at ease in a number of ways.

**Let them watch from the sideline:** Staten encourages parents to bring their child along to one of their appointments before it’s the child’s turn in the chair.

“Let them sit and watch and see how non-threatening it is,” he said.

**Choose your words carefully:** Yes, there are drills and needles in a dentist’s office, but filling a child’s heads with these images will have them fearing the worst. Avoid using words like “tools,” “scraping” or anything else that sounds painful.

**Stress the benefits:** “Don’t talk about what we’re going to do to them,” Staten said. “Talk about what we’re going to do for them.”

An obvious benefit of dental care is having a bright, healthy smile. Or tell them that regular checkups will help them avoid the more serious problems that can arise because of neglect.

**Read a book:** There are countless storybooks available that introduce children to the subject. Reading about Dora’s or Sponge Bob’s trip to the dentist will take some mystery out of the experience. Not all books are dentist approved, however. Some stories that have been in publication for a long time may reflect outdated attitudes towards dentistry.

**Be patient:** Occasionally, there will be a child who is just too scared to open his mouth. In these instances, the dentist may simply talk to the child to build trust, but it may not happen on the first appointment.

Staten has a policy of not charging for these “getting to know you” sessions when no work is performed, believing that it is a worthwhile investment in the child’s future as a dental patient.

**Find the right dentist:** Modern dentists are generally skilled in dealing with their patients’ anxieties, but they still differ in personality and approach. Some children may prefer a high-energy dentist who cracks jokes, while others will feel more comfortable with one who projects a reassuring calmness.

A good dentist will alter his or her chair-side manner based on how an individual responds, but if things just aren’t clicking, there’s no harm in trying someone new.

**Don’t over prepare:** Staten cautions against making too big of a deal about an upcoming appointment, even if it is positive reinforcement.

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-- Be Healthy Springfield (Ill.)

### **Your kids and the dentist**

Wipe your baby’s gums with a clean gauze pad or washcloth after each feeding. Start brushing your child’s teeth with water as soon as the first tooth appears.

Children over age 2 should use only a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste. Floss your child’s teeth as soon as two teeth come in side-by-side. Brush and floss your child’s teeth until the child is able to do it himself.

The American Dental Association recommends children should make their first dental visit by their first birthday.

-- Illinois State Dental Society