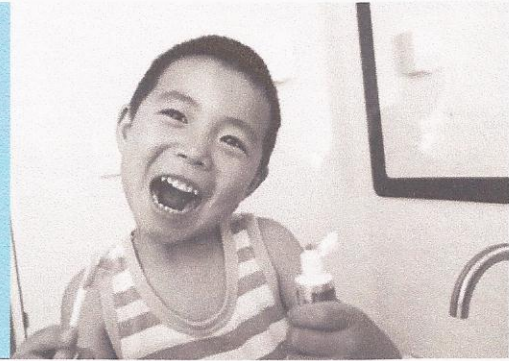


DENTAL DRAMA:

How to handle kids' dental anxiety



By Heidi Smith Luedtke, Ph.D.

Each night at my house there's a show after dinner. I call it *the dental drama*.

As I approach my son's mouth with the toothbrush, he closes it tight. I ply him with sparkly, watermelon-flavored toothpaste. Still, he resists.

I threaten. He negotiates. After several minutes, he lets me brush. As I do, he sucks off the toothpaste, bites the toothbrush and gags for effect.

With antics like this, it's no surprise the American Academy of Pediatric Dentists (AAPD) reports more than half of children have cavities by second grade.

If you have season tickets to the dental drama, read on for expert, show-stopping advice.

Kids — like adults — fear the unknown. Explain what to expect using non-threatening, age-appropriate language.

At-Home Hygiene

Kids need to brush at least twice a day and floss between teeth, and parent involvement is critical.

"Parents should brush their children's teeth as long as possible," says Dr. Peter Lubisich, a pediatric dentist in Vancouver. "Children lack commitment and a knowledgeable comprehension of the whys and hows of

the importance of good brushing." Realistically, parents should expect to brush kids' teeth until age 7 or 8, and to floss them until age 9 or 10.

Some kids resist brushing because they want to retain control. Others may be intimidated by the process itself. Your child may fear you'll be rough with the toothbrush, or that they'll choke on toothpaste and saliva. Go easy on the toothpaste and break brushing into segments so your child has time to calm down (and spit) in between. The fast and furious approach may be over-stimulating.

Some dentists say it's best to brush kids' teeth right after dinner. Doing so removes food particles several hours before bedtime and keeps dental drama from interfering with your wind-down routine. Sing a song or use a timer, so your child knows how long brushing will last. If you make it a silly song, you may just steal the show.

Pre-Visit Prep


"Children should visit the dentist by one year old," says Dr. Lubisich. "Children who see the dentist at an early age have a rapport with the office and staff. They perceive the dental environment as a fun and non-threatening place." Other advantages of early dental visits include quality preventive instruction for the parent and early diagnosis of dental problems.

Kids — like adults — fear the unknown. Explain what to expect using non-threatening, age-appropriate language. "Parents should introduce the dentist in the same casual manner that they would if they were to visit the mall," says Dr. Lubisich. "Children are smart! If a lot of preparation precedes an event, warning signs go off in their mind." Especially avoid words like "needle" or "drill." Your child's imagination may run wild. If needed, describe procedures in fun, familiar terms. Taking x-rays is "taking pictures of your teeth," polishing teeth is "tooth washing." The suction tube is a tiny vacuum for spit. Calling it a "spit sucker" turns drama into comedy.

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Make sure your baby stays healthy

- Get your baby's teeth screened by age one
- Talk to your dentist or physician

 **DELTA DENTAL**
**Washington Dental Service
Foundation**
Community Advocates for Oral Health



For tips on taking care of your baby's teeth, visit KidsOralHealth.org

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Knowledge is powerful. Read *Berenstain Bears Visit the Dentist* to teach kids the basics and *Throw Your Tooth on the Roof* to address loss of the primary teeth. Practice helps, too. Use a rotary toothbrush at home to familiarize your child with the sounds and sensations of dental equipment.

The most important thing is to have a positive attitude yourself. Many moms and dads have unpleasant memories of their own childhood dental visits. "Parents should not express their fears or anxieties about dental care to their child," says Dr. Lubisich. "A general rule is that an uptight parent will create the same feelings in their child." Let your child form opinions based on personal experience.

In the Office

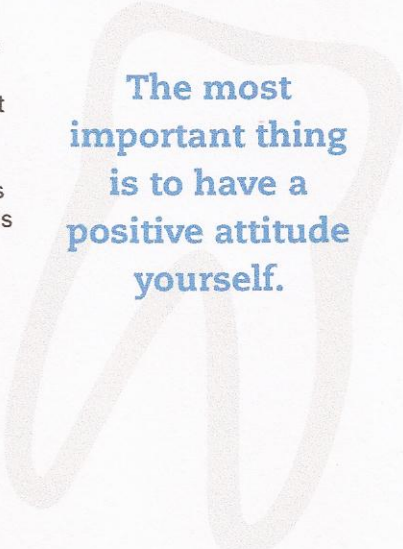
Dental instruments and procedures can be frightening. "Children's biggest fears are being alone in a room with a strange person or persons, no other people of their own age or status, and confinement," says Dr. Lubisich. They may worry that the instruments will hurt, or that their teeth or tongue will be sucked out.

Dentists and hygienists use the tell-show-do technique to ease kids' fears. They're also incredibly patient. Expect the dentist to explain what she'll do, show your child the instruments and materials she'll use, and then—once your child knows what's coming—gently do the work.

Procedures involving the drill tend to be the most frightening. The odor that develops when a tooth is cut can be unnerving, too. Enhance your child's confidence by praising his brave, helpful behavior before and after treatment.

Consider your child's dentist a health-care partner. To get the most out of your visit, come prepared with questions. If you have concerns about your child's oral hygiene habits, thumb sucking or cavities, discuss them with the dentist in private. You don't want to take the show on the road.

Heidi Smith Luedtke, Ph.D, is a personality psychologist and mom of two. She shares psychology lessons for life at heidiluedtke.com/blog.



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