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Give Your Child's Fears the Brush-Off: That First Visit To the Dentist

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

Does anyone really like going to the dentist? Well, believe it or not, there are many children who do, often thanks to their parents' positive approach to their first dental visit.

According to Dr. Steven Schneider of the San Diego Center for Dental Health in Poway, "The parent sets up the first visit in the child's mind." Schneider reminds parents not to place their own fears on the child. "Don't say, 'I always hate going to the dentist.' Or, 'It's only going to hurt a little bit.' Kids don't hear the 'little bit' part; they focus on the 'hurt,'" says Schneider.

Dr. Khuong Nguyen, of Clairemont Pediatric Dental, recommends a "lap-to-lap exam" by the age of one, to check that the first teeth are free of cavities. This first check-up, during which the parent holds the child, only takes about one minute.

Some parents are surprised that the first visit to the dentist should be scheduled so early. Dr. Nguyen explains, "The number one cause of caries is from milk or juice pooling around the child's teeth and gums at night." Babies who are put to bed with a bottle or sippy cup of milk or juice, or nursed frequently through the night, are at risk for cavities. "The goal is to catch cavities early. Children should visit the dentist every six months; otherwise they can be faced with rampant caries," cautions Nguyen.

In the search for your child's dentist, Schneider thinks that parents should see the office and room where work is done before booking an appointment. Schneider advises, "Watch the doctor's interaction with the child. Be sure the dentist gives the children eye-contact, as that is very important in the child's comfort level." He also shares, "Notice if there is a distinct odor in the dental office. If there is, kids won't want to come back."

Schneider suggests trying to arrange the first visit so no work has to be done on that day; ideally, the purpose should be just to establish rapport.

Carey Hansen, a registered dental hygienist in San Diego and mother of two pre-schoolers, offers the following tips, which instill good oral hygiene habits in young children while spontaneously preparing them for their first visit to the dentist.

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- Start early. Even before babies have teeth, simply take a clean washcloth and swipe their gums of debris from milk and spit-up. Bath-time is great for this.
- As soon as the first tooth pokes through, brush it gently with a soft baby toothbrush. A great product is the plastic baby mouth cleaner that slips on an adult finger and has tiny soft plastic bristles. No toothpaste is necessary or even recommended for babies. Simply use water. Floss wherever two teeth touch.
- The main point at this age is getting the children used to their teeth being looked at and cleaned. Daily cleaning will not only keep their mouths healthy, but will also ease anxiety of the first dental visit.
- The first dental visit is an opportunity for the child to sit in the dental chair just for fun and look at the surroundings. It is also an important time for parents to ask questions in a relaxed manner and setting. That way, if there is an emergency, such as a broken tooth, at least that wouldn't be the child's introduction to the dental office.

To prepare children for their first real cleaning near the age of three, Dr. Nguyen suggests telling them their teeth will be brushed gently with an electric toothbrush. Parents can explain that the dentist will look at their teeth and count them, and might also take a picture of their teeth. Dr. Schneider recommends reading a light-hearted book such as *The Berenstain Bears Visit the Dentist*, by Stan and Jan Berenstain (Random House Books for Young Readers).

Dr. Nguyen does a diet analysis for his patients. He asks parents what kinds of snacks their children eat so he can help assess if eating habits need to change. Nguyen often advises that children decrease the frequency of their snacking.

Watch Out For Pickles!

The Dental Health Initiative/Share the Care and Nutrition Network have developed a series of brochures that offer helpful information about which snack foods are most risky.

We all know that sugary snacks are not the best choice, but how about pickles or crackers? Pickles are considered a "high-acid" snack, and may be even worse for our teeth than candy, if eaten frequently. Teeth may chip easily because the acid causes the enamel to dissolve and weaken.

Orange juice, soda, and salted dried plums are a few other high-acid snacks listed in the brochure. Carbohydrates found in bread, crackers, rice and tortillas create a problem because the starches in these foods break down to sugars and stick to teeth.

When is the best time to eat candy?

With meals. The other meal-time foods and saliva can help clean teeth when candy, high-acid foods or carbohydrate-rich foods are eaten, according to The Dental Health Initiative/Share the Care.

If you do serve a risky food between meals, there are ways to help minimize harm to teeth. It is best not to brush teeth immediately after eating a high-acid snack, as the acid has already weakened the teeth and brushing can wear them down.

Immediately after the snack, "munch juicy, crunchy fruits and vegetables, eat cheese or drink milk, or chew sugarless gum," as stated in The Dental Health Initiative/Share the Care's brochure, *Foods That Taste Tart May Not Be Too Smart For Your Teeth*.

Interestingly, cheese and milk seem to have anti-cavity effects.

Visit Share the Care's web site, sharethecaredental.org, and click on Resources for healthy snack ideas.

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“Five candy bars at once are better than one candy bar every hour,” Nguyen says. This is because each separate snack re-coats the teeth with plaque-producing sugars. When a child snacks all day, the teeth are endlessly assaulted. Parents should avoid sticky snacks such as raisins, “nature’s gummy bears,” as Schneider calls them. And dentists everywhere plead that children drink nothing but water at night.

According to Peggy Yamagata, a registered dental hygienist and Program Manager of San Diego’s Dental Health Initiative/Share the Care, the bacteria that cause cavities are transmitted to young children from birth to age four from the primary caregiver. This can occur from sharing food and utensils, and allowing the baby to put fingers in the caregiver’s mouth and then into her own.

Yamagata explains, “These behaviors generally can’t be eliminated because they are a natural part of the caregiving relationship. That’s why it’s important for caregivers to have healthy mouths.” Yamagata stresses that parents need to make it a priority to have their children seen by age one so any developing problems can be caught early

“Most people don’t know that cavities are white when they first start, and they generally begin on the back side of the front teeth. By the time cavities are dark, the damage to the tooth has progressed and usually requires a filling,” Yamagata says.

The good news is that parents have an opportunity to create positive expectations for a lifetime of good dental care. The easiest way to shape the tone of a child’s first visit to the dentist is to create a fun but strict daily dental routine and to select snacks with care.

Even if a child has already had a fearful experience, with some brainstorming her next dental visit can be different. Of course, parents’ attitudes about visiting the dentist are key. So, lead by example; learn to love your floss and make friends with your dentist!

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