



by Karen Stephens

Good Dental Health Begins in Early Childhood

I don't remember my first visit to the dentist; but I sure remember my sister's. She was about 5 at the time. We visited the dentist together that day. Since I'm older, I went first to be her role model for dental decorum. I didn't have a cavity that day, so I did my job. Little sis wasn't so lucky. Things started out okay when she climbed into the big chair. She sat still during the check-up and didn't even tear up when a cavity was found.

No, it took a little longer. You see, the dentist didn't bother to prep her for the cavity filling process. As I watched, he held the stainless steel drill right near her face and cranked it up. My sister then did an incredibly brave thing — she bolted. Her leap was punctuated with a perfect-pitch scream. Wide-eyed, I was amazed she had the nerve to do it, to defy the adults. But pure fear took over. She ran right past me into the lobby. I still laugh at the memory of mom high-tailing it after her.

Mom didn't press the issue. After catching her we immediately got into the car and went home in a huff. My mom was livid. And to her credit, she was mad at the dentist, not my sis. "What kind of dentist is he? Scaring a kid half to death like that!" She went along in that vein for quite a while. It was very reassuring to have her on our side. But that didn't mean we didn't go to the dentist anymore; she found a dentist with a better chair-side manner.

Take a lesson from my mom. By all means, get your kids dental care, but make sure the dentist understands how to work with children! As with any habit, good dental habits are best established during childhood. The following suggestions for dental routines at home, child care, and at the dentist office can make your child's introduction to dental care more positive than my sister's. Well-prepared children will be able to reveal their bravery through cooperation rather than escape!

Dental Care for Children

- Good nutrition paves the way to healthy teeth, no matter what heredity passes along. Fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low fat dairy, and protein products give teeth support. Limit the sugars in sweets, candies, gum, soda pop.
- Even before children's teeth begin to grow in, gently clean gums and tongue daily with soft gauze to remove plaque. That practice establishes a child's preference for a clean feeling mouth. When a baby tooth erupts, begin a regular brushing routine using a soft brush.
- By age 2 children can learn to brush teeth, gums, and tongue independently. Children age 3 and older can be taught to floss. Ask the dental hygienist to show them how. Parents can floss for children who are younger than 3; just be sure not to snap gums between teeth with the floss.
- Prevent baby bottle mouth problems (like tooth decay and other nasty stuff) by never putting your child down to rest or sleep with a bottle of milk, formula, fruit juice, or soda. If you allow your child to carry a bottle around during the day, fill it with water only. Sugars continually mixing with saliva will turn into acids to attack tooth enamel.

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- Children should visit a dentist by their first year and have teeth cleaned every six months.
- To help prevent childhood cavities, confer with your dentist about fluoride or sealant treatments. How your local water supply is treated will play a role in deciding what treatments your child may need.
- If a baby or permanent tooth is knocked out during an injury, contact your dentist. A baby tooth will be naturally replaced by a permanent tooth. However, if a permanent tooth is knocked out, do your best to locate the tooth and immediately put it into milk (without any other cleaning). Then take your child and the tooth to the dentist as soon as possible.
- Children should brush teeth, using a soft brush, after each meal, and ideally even after snacks. Even at child care, kids should be brushing teeth after main meals. When a toothbrush isn't handy, a crunchy fresh apple really does help clean teeth.

Prepare Children for the Dentist Visit

When visiting the dentist, kids will hear new words, smell new smells, feel new textures, and see new things. They're likely to feel completely out of control and invaded. Some details, like bright lights and dentist's facemask, may cause alarm.

Another unanticipated encounter in the dentist office may be graphic posters of tooth decay and gum disease. The posters may not alarm adults, but you can never know exactly what goes through a child's mind. If your child stares at such posters, remind her that the dentist is trying to prevent such things in peoples' mouths, not cause them. It might bring a sigh of relief.

Dental Terms to Explain

At the dentist office, the children will hear lots of new words. Understanding what they mean in child-speak will help reduce children's fear and anxiety. Be sure to explain them, but don't address all the terms at once. Explain them as they are relevant to your child's experience at the time.

Keep explanations as simple as possible. Short and sweet is best. As children grow, explanations can expand. Words to explain include: bacteria, canines, cavity, decay, dental hygienist, dentist, drill, facemask, filling, flossing, fluoride, gums, incisors, lead apron, molars, mouth mirror, Novocain, numbing, paper bib, plaque, reclining dental chair, rinse bowl, rubber (latex) gloves, sealant, tartar, tooth enamel, toothbrush, toothpaste, and x-ray camera.

Children's Books about Dental Health

Discussions about what dentists do and why procedures are necessary can be introduced with a good children's book. Well-illustrated books help children visualize and prepare for the experience. Reading together also gives children a chance to think and ask questions before they find themselves actually in the dental chair. Here are a few selections to investigate.

- *Those Icky Sticky Smelly Cavity-Causing but...Invisible Germs* by Judith Rice (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 1997).
- *My Dentist, My Friend* by P. K. Hallinan (New York: Ideals Publications, 2001).
- *Brushing Well* by Helen Frost (Mankato, MN: Capstone Press, 1998).
- *Going to the Dentist* by Helen Frost (Mankato, MN: Capstone Press, 1999).
- *Going to the Dentist* by Anne Civardi and Stephen Cartwright (Tulsa, OK: Usborne Books, 2001).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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