

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

Creating healthy smiles for all children

By Dr. Maritza Morell



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Sometimes we forget how difficult it can be to be little in this big world. All the new things to learn and do. Expectations grow as do our children. The one thing children don't need more of is stress and anxiety. Many people don't associate the dentist with happy thoughts, neither do children. How many times have you heard people saying, "I hate going to the dentist" or "I feel faint and sick to the stomach just thinking about the sound of the drill."

Generally, this unhappiness starts in childhood. Imagine what it is like for a small child to go to the dentist for the first time. For most of them, it is a frightening experience because of sensory overload with loud sounds, lights, smells and touch. This presents a special challenge for dental treatment because pretty much anything about dentistry involves these things.

When should your child first see a dentist, and why? The short answer is the first visit should be by the first birthday, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Early dental visits for children are extremely important to encourage successful integration into the dental environment from an early age. A positive first experience will lessen the chances of stressful future visits. For any child, preparation and predictability will make all dental visits a success!

More than 1 in 4 children in the United States have cavities by the time they are 4 years old, sometimes as early as age 2! To prevent early childhood cavities, parents need to learn how to manage diet, hygiene, and fluoride to prevent problems before they start. The age-1 visit is similar to a well-baby check at the pediatrician's office. It is a good way to learn proper oral hygiene methods and let parents discuss:

- How to care for an infant's or toddler's mouth.
- Appropriate use of fluoride for your child.
- Oral habits, including finger and thumb sucking.
- Ways to prevent oral and facial accidents and trauma.
- Teething and developmental milestones.
- The relationship between diet and oral health.

Many dentists are trained to treat children. However, when deciding on the right dentist for your child, call the dental office and ask, "At what age does your office recommend that children be seen for their first dental visit?" Look for an office that suggests your child be seen by age 1, or you can look for a pediatric dentist whose specialty is the care of young children. In addition, you may also want to ask your pediatrician for a recommendation for a dentist who is familiar with the treatment of young patients in a specialized manner.

You may also want to see a pediatric dentist if your child has a medical condition or special needs that put him at risk of having dental-anxiety issues. Keep in mind that providing oral care to people with medical special needs such as autism requires special skills and can bring a sense of difficulty for parents and dental professionals alike. Feel free to call the office and ask the staff if they are familiar with the treatment of patients with special needs. Pediatric dentists undergo further specialized training after completing a doctorate in dental school to be trained in the treatment of young difficult patients, patients with all kinds of special needs, developmental conditions, disabilities, chronic medical conditions and congenital anomalies.

For example, at my pediatric dental practice and at the Children's Hospital Department of Dentistry, I treat autistic patients frequently and they generally do quite well. Most of the kids are sweet and do well with their parents' help. Getting a child with autism to be able to cope with routine dental visits is my ultimate goal. The parents and I work on taking away unpredictability of the dental visit by helping the patient to become familiar with the office, staff and equipment through a step-by-step process. Parents take pictures of the office, staff, the dentist and even the instruments we use to help them become acquainted with dentistry. In addition, we try to reduce unnecessary stimuli that might be disruptive by using noise-cancelling headphones and even watch movies or listening to music while I am treating them. Treatment modalities vary from one child to the other. When extensive dental treatment is needed, sedation or even general anesthesia in the hospital can often help patients with special needs to cope with the stress of the dental environment during treatment.

Every child, including those with special medical needs, must be given the opportunity to receive outstanding dental care in the most gentle, efficient and enthusiastic manner possible. Happy smiling!

Dr. Maritza Morell is a board-certified pediatric dentist at Andover Pediatric Dentistry, with locations in Andover and Lawrence. www.andoverpediatricdentistry.com.

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