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*Today's dental visits are much less intimidating to children than before. DR S. H. TAN compiles a useful list of tips that can even make your child's maiden visit fun!*

**D**ental professional of today are well-informed and equipped to make a child's dental checkup a pleasant experience. Using a show-and-tell approach, they explain what they are doing in words that fit a child's vocabulary; for example, the X-ray machine is a camera and the drill is a fire engine that whistles and squirts water!

On the home front, parents should understand that children do not have a natural fear of dental treatment – especially their first visit to the dentist –

# Tackling Your Child's First Dental



## *Choosing a dentist*

**Ask the following questions when choosing a dentist:**

- Does the dentist seem interested in prevention?
- Is the doctor good at handling children or at least is comfortable with them?
- Does the dentist recommend sealants (protective coatings applied to the chewing surfaces of back teeth), provide diet and home-care counselling and fluoride treatments?
- If your child has an unusual problem, you may wish to see a paediatric dentist. That is a doctor who has had special training in the care of children. Ask your dentist or paediatrician for recommendations.

unless they are allowed to have a bad dental experience or learn about it from someone else. It is thus up to the parents to take the necessary steps to prevent such unhappy preludes to a dental visit, as well as inculcate in their children the lifelong habit of proper dental hygiene.

# Tips for that crucial first visit

- Parents play an important part in getting children started with a good attitude towards dental care. Be completely natural and easy-going when you tell your child about the appointment. Enable your child to view this as an opportunity to meet new people who are interested in him and want to help him (or her) stay healthy.

- Familiarise your child with the dental office. Take your toddler along when someone else in the family is going for a dental checkup.

- Play “dentist”. Count your child’s teeth as you shine a light on them. Then switch roles and let your child play dentist.

- Read to your child a book about going to the dentist for the first time; for example: “Timmy Visits the Dentist”, a colouring book produced by the Singapore Dental Health Foundation.

- Don’t expect perfect behaviour. Your child may be shy or fearful and unconsciously misbehave because of it. If your child throws a tantrum, be firm. With a child over three years old, the dentist may want to handle the situation without your over-protective presence in the surgery room. Let the dentist decide whether you should stay. Even under normal situations, some children respond better without their parents present.

- Before the appointment, tell the dentist about your child, including any special needs or medical problems like allergies or heart conditions. If

necessary, encourage the child to bring along a comforting item like a teddy bear. Finally, you can help the doctor build quick rapport with the child by revealing beforehand what the kid loves to do or talk about.

- Arrange for the appointment on a day and time when the child is not tired, stressed or in a bad mood.

- Be low-key. Try not to be anxious yourself – you may end up hinting to the child that something unpleasant is about to happen. Treat the visit as routine. Avoid taboo words like pain, jab, pull or drill. Answer honestly any questions the child may ask, but spare them the gory details!

- Allow plenty of time for getting ready on the day of the appointment so as not to rush the child.

There are also some Don’ts parents should be aware of. Firstly, avoid using bribery and threats in an attempt to make them behave on that day. Especially refrain from threatening a child with a dental visit when he misbehaves or refuses to brush his teeth. This is guaranteed to ruin any positive efforts you put in to equate dental visits with good dental health in the child’s impressionable mind.

Lastly, if at the first visit the child experiences an unexpectedly low threshold for pain or panics at the sight of so much blood, do not carelessly blame it on the dentist or child or worse, dwell on it. Be comforting and reinforce the idea that regular visits will make such unpleasantities a thing of the past!

Some may ask: What could possibly happen if I take a relaxed approach in teaching my children the importance of dental health and visiting the dentist regularly? In a typical scenario, a child may grow up with crooked and stained teeth, uncomfortable bite, or prematurely lose many of their permanent teeth through decay, or be plagued with gum disease and toothaches. Even though such ailments *can* be cor-

rected in adulthood, there is nothing like having real, healthy teeth and gums, and corrective dentistry can be expensive and a chore to maintain.

So, with prevention (rather than cure) in mind, parents can pave the way for their children’s dental health by starting early. The objective is to bring them to the dentist early to identify any existing or potential dental problem before it progresses; this will

also allay any unfounded fears kids may have about dental treatment. The best time for a child’s first dental visit is at between one and two-and-a-half, when all the milk teeth have erupted, as children tend to develop cavities as soon as that happens.

Thus, the practice of teaching preventive measures during childhood will save them much time, inconvenience and discomfort later in adulthood. ●