



Brush Up on Oral Health

Talking with Children About Dental Visits

It's understandable that children sometimes get nervous about their first few dental visits. Going to the dental office or clinic is a new and unfamiliar experience for them. For young children who are not used to oral health care yet, having their teeth and mouths examined can feel intrusive. What young children hear about dental visits affects what they think an upcoming visit will be like. If they are told that bad things may happen during a dental visit, they might feel afraid.



Tips for Head Start Staff to Share with Parents to Prepare Children for Dental Visits

Follow these tips to prepare children for dental visits:

- **Be positive.** Dental visits are easy and painless for most children. Suggest that parents use positive statements about what will happen during a visit. For example, say, "The dentist will see what a good job you do taking care of your teeth" or "When you leave the dental office, your teeth will be nice and clean."
- **Keep it short and simple.** If children ask what will happen during the dental visit, advise parents to give a short, simple answer. For example, parents can say, "The dental hygienist will count how many teeth you have." Sharing too much information about dental visits may confuse and worry children.
- **Don't bring up shots or possible pain.** Many children worry about getting shots or having their teeth drilled during a dental visit. Oral health providers use "sleepy juice" to numb the gum before giving a shot, so the child barely feels it. If the child asks whether he or she will get a shot, a good answer for parents to give is, "I don't know, but we can ask the dentist or dental hygienist."
- **Tell parents to keep their fears to themselves.** If parents have fears about dental visits, tell them not to share their feelings with their child. Hearing about adults' fears can make children afraid of dental visits too.
- **Role-play visiting the dentist and dental hygienist.** Tell parents to have children dress up and pretend that they are dentists or dental hygienists. Children can use white shirts

as lab coats, paper napkins as patient bibs, and coffee filters and yarn as masks. Advise parents to let children pretend to examine and count their parents', sisters', or brothers' teeth.

- **Read books or watch videos together.**

Encourage parents to use age-appropriate books and videos about dental visits. Remind parents to preview them before reading or watching them with their child. Books and videos with words like hurt, pain, shot, drill, or any other words that may frighten children should not be used. Tell parents to ask a children's librarian, dentist, dental hygienist, or early childhood education expert to suggest one or two good books and videos about dental visits.

- [Sesame Street in Communities' oral health](#) webpage has games, videos, and more on that can be used to talk to children before and during a dental visit.

- **Make dental visits fun.** Encourage parents to have children bring a favorite stuffed animal or blanket to the dental visit. Let children wear a special outfit or costume to the visit. Also, suggest that parents plan a fun activity after the visit.



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