

# Scared of the Dentist?

**M**ost things kids fear, like monsters under the bed or creepy clowns, don't directly affect their health. But being scared of the dentist is different, especially if your child is too afraid to cooperate or if you put off appointments. It helps if a child starts dentist visits young—even as a baby!—but if that window is shut, use these strategies to make sure your kid gets proper care.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER



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## 1 Play dentist at home

A recent study in the *Journal of Dental Anesthesia and Pain Medicine* confirmed the power of play-time: In it, the dentist explained the cavity-filling procedure to all kids in child-friendly language. Some kids got to play a smartphone dentist game, some got to touch toy dental instruments, and others played with the instruments and a Play-Doh Doctor Drill 'N Fill set. In the play groups, 85% exhibited positive behavior, such as laughter and enjoyment, compared with 55% of the other kids. "Playing is a fun way to work on a child's fear of the unknown, which is likely the biggest reason kids are anxious about the dentist in the first place," says Eric K. Wood, D.D.S., lead pediatric dentist for Bright Now Dental in Cleveland and Canton, OH.

## 2 Watch your words

Avoid saying "hurt," "pain," or "afraid" when talking about the dentist. "Even if you're saying something like 'It won't hurt,' it plants the idea that it *could* hurt," says Kevin Donly, D.D.S., M.S., president of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. Instead, use positive or neutral words like "clean" and "healthy." Still, it's crucial for you and the dentist to be honest and not spring any surprises. "A good dentist should always tell and show your child everything that he or she is going to do before doing it," says Donly.

## 3 Ask for dimmer lights

Darkening the room, playing soothing music, and draping patients with a weighted wrap reduced anxiety, sensory discomfort, and pain perception in both typically developing kids and those with autism spectrum disorder, researchers from the Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC in Los Angeles found. See if your child's dentist is willing to give those a try.

## 4 Call before you arrive

Prior to driving to the dentist, find out if the office is on schedule. When kids are made to wait (and wait and wait) before their appointments, fear and anxiety brew. In fact, prolonged wait times can build on a child's existing dental worries, triggering an "unbearable level" of fear, notes a study in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*.

## 5 Consider sedation

If you're at the point where your child's fear of the dentist is too much, it's OK to try sedation. "We're really aiming for no-tear dentistry, and for some kids, sedation can be an integral part of that," says Wood. Options include nitrous oxide (laughing gas), mild oral sedation, and general anesthesia. Discuss them with your child's dentist if other strategies fail.