

6 Tricks for Teaching Your Kids Better Dental Habits

Scared of the dentist? You could be passing that fear on to your children, according to a new study from the Rey Juan Carlos University of Madrid. Researchers found that the development of “dentophobia” is closely linked to parents’ behavior in the dentist’s chair. What’s more, the way Dad responds to the dentist may be particularly important in how both the child and the mother view their own dentist visits.

Kids live by their parents’ example, so remaining calm at the dentist’s office in front of your children is key to how they will behave during their own future cleanings and also affects whether or not they will stick with other good dental habits. From maintaining a relaxed demeanor during dentist visits to encouraging daily brushing, there are many ways to ensure your kids grow up with healthy teeth and mouths. Here are a few strategies you might try:

Show 'Em How It's Done

Because we know the best way to teach is by your own example, your toddler should see you brushing your teeth every morning and evening. If you usually do this before they get up or after they go to bed, alter your routine so they can be present. You can even let your child help you brush your teeth just like you help them with theirs. It’s only fair! You can also find YouTube videos of children the same age as your child having a good time using a toothbrush. Kids love having a peer to relate to when they are learning a new skill.

Make It Story Time

While seeing you take care of your own teeth is a good start, there’s nothing like a little suspense to bribe your child into doing what you want. Use tooth brushing time to tell a story. If you’re creative, you can make up a story that incorporates mythical characters like the knight (the toothbrush) and the goblins (plaque) in an epic struggle in the

dragon's cave (their mouth). They have to keep their mouth open so you can see what's going on with the characters in your story. Singing or listening to a special tooth brushing song is good too. Or, take the show into the living room and have them brush while they watch a favorite DVD.

Go High Tech

Why shouldn't tooth-care tools be more like toys? The No. 1 item that parents – and pediatric dentists alike! – rave about in helping motivate their child to practice good dental hygiene habits is the electric toothbrush. It makes brushing fast, easy and fun while being gentle on delicate gums. Try a water flosser instead of floss. Add a whale or dolphin shaped “faucet fountain” to your bathroom tap to make rinsing fun.

Leverage the Gross-Out Factor

Visuals are your best friend when it comes to encouraging kids to keep their teeth clean. Even older children will be impressed with the sight of a mouth full of crud. Use plaque disclosing products (chewable tablets or mouth rinse) to highlight areas of buildup they may have missed. Consider joining in to show that everybody misses spots sometimes, not to mention finding out where you need to brush better, as well. Just be sure they know that brushing harder isn't the answer. They need to brush gently using circular motions along the gum line and chewing surfaces and follow up with proper flossing technique to get rid of the plaque. If it has hardened into tartar, they need a visit to the dentist for a thorough cleaning.

Mommy's Little Helper

If your child is too young to do a good job of brushing her own teeth and doesn't want you to do it, that's OK. You can always bring in a third party to perform this odious task. That would be your trusty sock puppet. Decorate a sock to be a dentist character (e.g. Donald the Doggie Dentist) and have him do the brushing and flossing. Your dentist puppet can also go along with your child to her first real dentist appointment to make the experience less scary.

Give Them the Tools to Take Over

What about older children? There comes a time when you have to pass the torch and let your child take over more of their own dental care. By about 5 or 6, kids have sufficient dexterity and motor control to brush properly (although they probably still need to be reminded to brush and floss and should still be supervised until 7 or 8, according to the ADA). At this age, they may appreciate tools that help them structure their oral hygiene routine. That could be setting an alarm that goes off when it's tooth-brushing time or brushing along with you. Or, it could be using a timer that beeps every 30 seconds to let them know to move on to the next "quadrant" of their mouth. Over time, the more responsibility they can take for maintaining their good dental hygiene.

There's much more to maintaining the perfect smile. Find your perfect dentist.