

Going to the dentist

Some tips for parents on taking their child for their first dental appointment, and the wider developmental benefits of doing so. By **Annette Rawstrone**



Establishing a proper oral hygiene routine when your child is young is vital for helping to ensure that they develop strong and healthy teeth. Along with brushing your child's teeth twice a day, the British Dental Association recommends taking them to see a dentist every six months.

These visits should be positive events, rather than something that your child dreads, so it's important to help your child to be at ease with the role of the dentist as someone who helps us and what will happen on their visit.

BEFORE THE VISIT

■ Before talking to your child about a trip to the dentist, consider your own feelings about dentists. Children pick up easily on adults' emotions, so try not to pass on any of your own anxieties to your child. A routine check-up should not be something for your child to fear.

■ Explain to your child the role of dentists and how they help us to keep our teeth healthy. Talk about the importance of having healthy teeth and gums.

■ If possible, start taking your child to the dentist when their first tooth

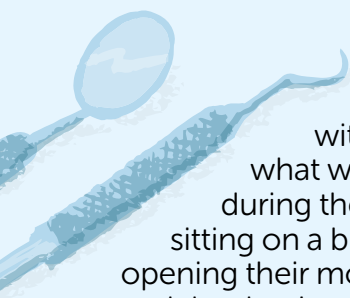
erupts, at around six months old, so that they get used to the dentist's surgery.

However, don't worry if you haven't done that. You could start by taking your child along to watch when you're having a routine dental appointment so that they know what to expect.

■ If your child is nervous about the visit, encourage them to take a favourite toy along with them or reassure them that you will be there or that they can sit on your knee.

■ The idea of someone looking into their mouth, and perhaps using a bright light or strange equipment can be





daunting. Discuss with your child what will happen during the visit – sitting on a big chair, opening their mouth wide and the dentist counting their teeth. Use story books or pictures to help your child understand.

- Be careful to keep any conversations positive – avoid using words such as ‘drill’, ‘extractions’ or ‘fillings’.
- Prepare any questions you’d like to ask before you go to the dentist – perhaps you want reassurance on cleaning your child’s teeth or appropriate milestones for tooth growth.

HOW YOUR CHILD IS BENEFITING

A trip to the dentist can be a great learning experience for young children.

Understanding the world

Going to the dentist will help your child understand that there are people whose job it is to help us in our day-to-day lives. It will also make them more aware of the different roles that people have.

Having a positive visit to the dentist can help to allay any fears that your child may have when they need to be seen by another medical professional.

Vocabulary development

Try to introduce new key vocabulary specific to the dentist visit, such as ‘enamel’, ‘jaws’, ‘surgery’, ‘hygienist’ and ‘appointment’.

Numeracy

Talk about how many teeth



your child has and how the dentist counts them. You could introduce the concept of time by discussing how you have made an appointment and how that means you need to be at the surgery for a certain time.

Opportunities to interact

Going into a new place can make your child shy, so don’t force them to speak to the people. However, they may want to say hello or goodbye to the dentist, or help you to make a follow-up appointment.

Personal hygiene

Discussing what our teeth are used for – eating, talking, smiling – and why it is important to look after them will help your child to understand personal hygiene routines.

Explain how not looking after our teeth can result in tooth decay, which is when a tooth gets a hole in it. This can link to keeping our bodies healthy by being careful about what we eat and drink.

AFTER THE EVENT

Visiting the dentist may inspire your child to learn more about people whose job it is to help us. So, talk to them about other people in the community who help us to stay safe and healthy, such as the emergency services, opticians, doctors and refuse collectors. Perhaps look out for open days at your local fire station centre.

Take the opportunity too to remind your child about the links between healthy teeth and healthy eating – and explain why we should avoid eating or drinking lots of sweet and sugary things. ■



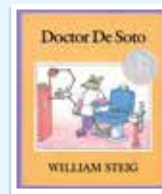
Open Wide... What's Inside?
by Alex Rushworth

A humorous rhyming story that will have your child rushing for their toothbrush.



Tusk Trouble
by Jane Clarke

Wilbur’s tusk hurts when he chews and when he plays. But he doesn’t want to go to the dentist.



Doctor De Soto
by William Steig

Is the kind dentist, who just happens to be a mouse, foolish to agree to help a fox with bad toothache?



Peppa Pig: Dentist Trip
by Ladybird

It’s George’s first visit to the dentist and he’s a teeny bit nervous.



Brush Your Teeth, Please: a pop-up book
by Leslie McGuire

Learn about dental hygiene with a chimp that brushes his teeth and a shark that flosses!



FURTHER INFORMATION

Oral Health Foundation,
www.dentalhealth.org