

BABY TEETH MATTER: Behavior Guidance Tips



These practical tips are from dental providers in the field. We are guiding OUR behavior for a successful outcome with the goal of getting the child to return.

Your demeanor should be like the “dog whisperer”, **calm and assertive with an added dose of playful and cheerful**. This will spread to the parent AND child, assuring them that you are calm and in control.

At the first screening, give the child “**homework**” of practicing opening their mouth as wide as possible. A dentist told us that children can’t wait to come back and show how wide they can open.

Falling backwards is a common human fear. Consider having the **dental chair already reclined**. Alternatively, if the chair is upright, you can push both the button to recline AND the child’s nose at the same time. This usually produces a giggle.

Consider trading sunglasses for **clear glasses** so that you can see the child’s eyes. The eyes will guide you as to whether the child is afraid, in pain, or needs a break.

If a child isn’t ready for a screening, take a cup of water and use the **mouth mirror like a spoon** to play with the water and slowly approach the child’s mouth until they take a sip. They are now likely ready.

For very young children, **count down from 3** every time you are in their mouth, and come out for a 1-5 second break whenever you say “one.” This is a powerful tool for desensitization.

Give children **choices** like “Should we use a red or a blue toothbrush today?”

Use **humor and show interest** by asking questions like “Are you married?”, “Who is your favorite superhero?”

Use **distraction techniques** like a disposable mouth mirror or hand mirror and let them try to find themselves in the mirror. If you are trying to buy some time for materials to set up, play “Simon says”.

Ask the **parent** to work with you. They will have ideas about how to calm their child or what time of day is best for appointments. Let them know that “dental fears” are passed to children from their parents.

As part of a “**tell-show-do**” routine, you might let the child hook up the saliva ejector or you can play with the air-water syringe, saliva ejector, and a cup. Water play! Don’t react to spills. It’s just water!

Provide rewards or toys to give the child a reason to look forward to appointments.

At the end of each appointment, tell the child “**thank you for trusting me today**”. A child’s experience is framed by what you say at the end of the appointment. Give a “**gold star**” when an appointment goes reasonably well. Highlight something that they did well like “You did a good job sitting in the chair”.

It’s OK to **reschedule** an appointment if a child is very poorly behaved. Tell the parent that it isn’t safe to proceed. Stay open-minded because it isn’t unusual for a child’s behavior to change from one appointment to another. On the other hand, if a very young child is crying, **do proceed with the screening and fluoride varnish**. This is developmental and at some ages, almost all babies cry.

Remain calm and carry on!