

Taking Kids to the Doctor—or the Dentist

“You don’t have to brush all your teeth, just the ones you want to keep.”—Anonymous

Few people look forward to going to the doctor or the dentist, and kids can be even more resistant than adults. Yet, regular doctor and dentist visits are key to maintaining good health, and helping children get into the habit of regular checkups will help them be more likely to continue this practice when they’re adults. Consider these ideas to make visiting the doctor and the dentist easier.

Try it...

For all parents

- Find doctors and dentists who work well with children and teenagers. If you’re not sure where to look, ask other parents. Usually there are a number who specialize in family dentistry and pediatrics.
- Create a master checkup list so that you can keep track of when each family member visits the doctor or dentist. Many dentist offices offer the opportunity to make your next six-month appointment, but most doctor offices do not book a year in advance, which makes it easy for those annual visits to fall through the cracks.
- Read solid information on children’s health (for different age groups) at the American Academy of Pediatrics at <http://www.aap.org/topics.html>.
- Try different hygienists until you find one who has a good rapport with your child. Some dentist and doctor offices have a number of physicians, so feel free to visit different ones until you find one you and your child both enjoy seeing.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Go to all the well-child checkups your clinic recommends, and make sure your child receives all the immunizations your pediatrician suggests.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that 6-month-olds receive an oral assessment (checkup of teeth) by a pediatrician. The American Dental Association recommends that children have their first dental visit around their first birthday.
- Doctor visits for young children often involve immunizations, and young children can quickly assume that every visit will require a shot. This can make it difficult for a young child to want to go to the doctor. Figure out soothing techniques to take with you, such as a stuffed animal to hold or a promise of getting a small treat afterward.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Encourage your child to make eye contact with the doctor and dentist and to answer

some questions (instead of you answering all the questions). Talk about how this is *your* child's health, and it's important for your child to begin to develop relationships with health care providers.

- Some children at this age develop a great fear of doctors and dentists, particularly if they've had a lot of shots or procedures. Some will act in embarrassing ways, such as knocking over things in the room and being difficult to control. If your child is prone to do this, role-play visits at home. Talk about how important it is to be brave. Help your child identify an action figure or hero to think of when he or she is visiting the doctor or dentist.
- If your child likes collecting his or her teeth, consider creating a tooth jar and asking the tooth fairy to return the tooth after putting it under your child's pillow.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Puberty is starting earlier and earlier for kids, so don't be surprised if your daughter starts a menstrual cycle at an early age. If this happens, track the cycles for your child until she is older and can do so by herself.
- Most parents feel uncomfortable dealing with their child's emerging sexuality, but it's happening whether you like it not. Many doctors are trained to help you in this area. To find a doctor in your community who specializes in adolescents, check out the Society for Adolescent Medicine at <http://www.adolescenthealth.org/Search/>. Whatever you do, don't avoid the issue of sexuality (and also don't pry or pester your child for too many details). What's important is to connect your child with a doctor he or she can confide in and to create an atmosphere of openness so that your child can come to you if he or she wishes.
- Continue to insist on regular dentist and doctor appointments since some kids at this age will resist them. Talk about how important it is to have good health habits and regular checkups, even if you don't feel like getting them.
- If your child needs braces, find an orthodontist who loves teenagers. (Other parents often know who these are in your community.) Some even let their patients choose different colored rubber bands and braces.
- At this age, your child may balk at seeing a pediatrician. If so, see if you can find a physician who specializes in adolescence—or if your pediatric clinic has other locations geared more for teenagers.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Continue to stress the importance of good eating habits, dental hygiene, and seeing doctors and dentists on a regular basis. Even though teenagers often slip into poor health habits, keep talking about the importance of them (and modeling good health habits). To get the conversation started, read [Conversations on the Go](#).
 - Some teenagers tend to disappear or become unavailable when it's time for a doctor or dentist appointment. If this happens, call the medical clinic and reschedule right away. Be clear with your teenager that it's important to have regular checkups.
 - If your teenager needs a major procedure, explain what's expected before, during, and after the procedure. Many teenagers are tempted to jump back into their normal lives without giving their bodies enough time to heal.
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