

Do you fear the dentist? How to make sure your child doesn't

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(Medical Xpress)—One painful experience at the dentist in childhood can lead to a lifetime of dental anxiety and tooth decay.

"Every week we see patients that are older, in their 30s, 40s and 50s, who complain that at a much younger age, such as in childhood, their previous dentist was rough, did not explain what was happening, carelessly drilled or poked and prodded and the memory is so fresh that they still feel anxiety as an adult," said Martin Hogan, DDS, Loyola University Health System.

"Unfortunately, years of missing dental cleanings and routine visits means they often come in to see us as a last resort when they are suffering a really painful condition that could have been avoided."

Hogan tries to establish a positive relationship with his young patients to prevent [dental anxiety](#).

"We ask parents to bring their [children](#) in when they get their first [tooth](#) or at their first birthday more to establish a positive routine than to actually do anything clinical," said Hogan, division director of dental medicine at Loyola and an assistant professor at Loyola Stritch School of Medicine. "We introduce ourselves. We let them play with the chair and certain equipment, and it is all done in a safe, nonthreatening environment without pain."

Hogan said the age of the patient does make a difference in their

attitude.

"Usually the younger children, under 10 and 12, have a harder time with the exams," he said. "Opening their mouth for a longer time, allowing the dentist to look at things in the mouth, holding still and not talking or moving can be tough for all kids," he said, adding that this is especially true for children with attention deficit disorders.

Tips to Make Dental Visits Go Smoothly

"For kids with ADHD, we deliberately schedule dental appointments earlier in the day; first thing in the morning is better than afternoons when kids are tired or stressed," he said. "Adults who have dental anxiety can also benefit from an early appointment to avoid escalation of fear."

Hogan also may suggest the use of a little nitrous gas. "Laughing gas takes away the edge and offers relaxation for many younger and also older patients who tend to get emotional," he said.

Explaining procedures and equipment thoroughly and involving the patient in the care, especially if they are older children, can also be helpful. "I show them the equipment before I use the implement and I talk to them about what I am doing, such as counting their teeth or polishing their tooth or removing plaque," Hogan said. "The patient has no negative surprises that way and is a more willing participant."

Hogan has some advice for parents of young children to help establish positive dental practices.

"Do not tell the kids that they will get cavities or need a root canal if they do not brush their teeth," he said. "And do not share your own previous painful dental experience with your child." Tales of dated practices such

as tying a string around the tooth and shutting the door or painful wisdom tooth extractions create unnecessary fear in children.

When Hogan has patients who are overcome with anxiety, he often gives them five-minute breaks before moving forward.

"Especially if they are younger, upset [patients](#) benefit from having time to release the stress through a cry or self-talk and usually are able to proceed again with a greater sense of calmness," he said. "For [kids](#), small rewards such as letting them choose a colorful sticker of a favorite character or giving them a coloring book ends the visit on a happy note."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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