

Comprehensive Dental Care for Toddlers

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As per Wikipedia definition, a toddler is referred to a child 12 to 36 months old. The toddler years are a great time of cognitive, emotional and social development. The word is derived from the “to toddle”, which means to walk unsteadily, like a child of this age.

Oral Hygiene in toddlers is very important since this is the time they should be introduced to good habits (including oral habits) and put them to practice, to last them a lifetime.

According to American Association of Pediatric Dentistry, a child should visit his/her dentist by his/her first birthday [1].

Some tips about Toddlers

The year between 2 and 3 is an exciting one because Toddlers are realizing that they are separate individuals from their parents and caregivers. This means that they are driven to assert [2] themselves, to communicate their likes and dislikes, and to act independently (as much as they can).

Toddlers also start developing language skills that help them express their ideas, wants, and needs; however, they do not understand logic and still have a hard time with waiting and self-control. In short, two-year olds want what they want and when they want it and that is why they use certain terms like “me do it” and “no clean teeth” or “me brush teeth”.

The emotional lives of 2 year olds are complex, because they start experiencing feelings of pride, shame, guilt and embarrassment for the first time.

Older toddlers are more like teenagers and thus have outbursts of feelings from moment to moment. They may be joyful when getting an ice cream and can give up when it starts dripping down their hands; they can come walking into the clinic in a very cheerful mood and suddenly become overwhelmed with all the surroundings and smells and start throwing tantrums.

Toddlers need the loving guidance of parents and care givers to figure out how to cope with their emotions. A young child is going through struggles when:

- You can't understand his words.
- He/she gets so angry and thus starts throwing tantrums or his/her favorite toy.
- He/she cannot settle for a substitute – if his favorite cartoon sticker is not available, he will not settle down for a second choice even though he also does like it.
- He/she acts out when frustrated and will either give up or get angry when he/she can't figure out how things work.

Children learn to manage strong feelings when:

- They use words or actions to get your attention or ask for help.
- They talk to themselves in a reassuring way when they are frustrated or frightened, For example, they might say to themselves, “Daddy will come to take me,” if mummy is the one accompanying him/ her to the clinic. Or they may tell you, “No injection, no pain”.
- They re-enact a stressful event, like a doctor’s visit.
- They use words like I’m angry rather than throwing things around or hitting people.

Once a child gets to “name” his feelings, you can help suggest how to feel better or solve the problem; this will help him learn how to deal with future situations. For example, if he is sad because he was forced to do something unwillingly, remind him how brave he was, and how he deserves a treat, aftermath. They should be given ideas on how to best manage strong emotions and need guidance on how to deal with big feelings like anger, sadness and frustration. So when they are really angry, validate what they are experiencing: “You are really angry right now because I said no more television”.

A visit to a dentist should be pre-planned by the parent by introducing them to some positive expectations of the visit (like story telling or book reading).

Clinic waiting area

The waiting area should be child friendly with pastel colors or decorated with child friendly décor or else a special corner should be dedicated just for kids with a low seating area or/and safe play area or/and a reading nook.

The front office staff should be amiable and friendly and should be experienced in dealing with very young kids, welcoming them warmly, into the surgery.

Inside the Surgery

- Most pediatric dentists nowadays swap the old style lab coat with colorful scrub suits to prevent “white coat fear” syndrome in children.
- The dentist should lower him/herself to greet the child so communication can be at eye level.
- Start by introducing yourself in a friendly manner and thank him/her for coming in to have his/her teeth checked.
- Give the child a few minutes to settle in with the help of his/her parent.
- Talk about his family, siblings and friends and make up stories so as to gain his/her trust.
- Use simple child-friendly language during communications so he/she can understand you.
- Use “Tell, show and Do” for each and every step. Let the child hold a mirror so that he can see how you are checking his teeth; once you have gained his trust, you can let go of the mirror and he will let you do the simple procedures on his teeth.
- Use “Positive reinforcements” by praising him/her for being brave throughout the process. Even if the television or visual aid is on, keep on talking to the child; this will also help to break the silence.
- Ask them what reward they would like at the end of the treatment session (give them a choice). Talking to them whilst you work, acts as a bait to draw their attention especially if they know there will be a reward towards the end.
- Suggest that he will be allowed to move the chair up and down or try out “Mr. Thirsty” (the saliva ejector), or “Mr. Wind” (the air syringe), at the end of the visit.
- Give kids their favorite soft toy to cuddle, for they tend to feel safe with them.
- Alternatively, you could play their favorite cartoon or read their favorite story to kill the time and get them distracted.

- “Pretend play” or “story-telling”, offers many chances to wait, take turns, and negotiate as children decide how the story will unfold. Talk about unhealthy feeding habits and how tooth monsters attack un-brushed teeth.
- During treatment, never give him/her a choice between a yes and a no; if you want him to open his mouth, request him to open his/mouth like his favorite cartoon character. Don’t ask him if he wants to open his mouth, for the answer will be a definite “No”; if you want to take an x-ray, request him to help you take an x-ray (picture of his teeth) so he can see the picture after that.
- The choices you give to child patients should be appropriate to their age: (it’s easier if you give them to choose between two or three). Some examples include: the color of eye protectors to be used during the treatment session, or the color of the bib/ apron used to protect their clothing.
- Make the treatment times as short as possible (around 20 minutes) because kids of this age group have a very short attention span and get bored and frustrated very quickly.
- Also make the treatments as painless as possible because once they feel pain, they will lose the trust and may never come back, so leave the painful or lengthy procedures for later visits.
- Empathize with the very young patients; after all they are just children.
- Start with a simple prophylaxis and fluoride varnish application.
- Deep cavities do not have to be dealt with immediately; they could be temporalized with a fluoride-releasing restorative until a later date when the child is more accustomed to coming to the clinic.
- After the procedure, let them choose their own coloring picture or sticker or toy to take home with them; this gives them a feeling of control and supports their growing confidence and sense of competency (the belief that “I can do it”).

Clinic waiting area

Feeding and Nutrition

Always encourage a Dental-healthy diet. By employing parenting strategies to instill proper toddler dental care at an early age, you will help your child develop proper oral care habits that will last a lifetime.

Dietary Counselling

Toddlers eat a wider variety of food than infants, so adding healthy choices will enhance your child’s oral health. Most Pediatric dentists provide dietary recommendations to parents or care givers of infants/ toddlers [3].

- Healthy foods include calcium-rich cheese, fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid/limit foods rich in sugary sweets to avoid cavities.
- Avoid foods that tend to cling onto tooth surface for longer periods of time.
- Cut back on fruit juice, and encourage the child to drink water.
- Avoid sharing utensils and drinking cups or pacifiers.
- Night bottle feeds should be weaned off to “zero” before the age of 2 years.
- If the child must drink milk before sleeping, it should be flushed with water because the lactose content of the milk will be prey to attack by cavity-causing bacteria.

Offering choices also helps head off the “Not That One” food where you keep offering the child different things and he keeps saying “Not that one, the other one!” Instead, try giving your child 3 choices and let him pick: “You can have an apple, a string cheese, or a bagel for snack. What sounds good to you?”

Look for ways to help your child “practice” self-control.

How to and when to brush

Toddlers can be very unruly when it comes to following routine and may want to have things their own way so if you need to help

brush your child's teeth for 2 minutes each day, use an egg timer so he/she can watch the countdown and keep track. They also get excited about it, because to them they are discovering something new. Young kids should always have parents or guardians brush their teeth for them; they can use the brush either before or after to act out the brushing part on their own.

At this early age, they have not developed the manual dexterity to brush correctly and thus the parents or care-taker should brush their teeth for them.

- Brushing of teeth should be twice daily (1), assisted by a parent or guardian: the child is allowed to play around with the tooth brush but it's the guardian who should clean the teeth properly
- Try singing a song or making a game to stretch out brushing time
- All surfaces of teeth are to be cleaned.
- Use a pea-sized amount of ADA-accepted fluoride toothpaste. Take care that your child doesn't swallow the paste.
- Use a toothbrush with soft bristles, brush inside surfaces of all teeth first, where plaque accumulates most. Angle bristles towards the gum-line. Brush gently back and forth.
- Clean all outside surfaces of teeth. Angle bristles towards the gum-line. Brush gently outwards from gum-line towards the edges of the teeth.
- Place brush so bristles are on the chewing surface of the teeth. Brush gently back and forth, or in circular motion.

Other Precautions

Toddlers are still learning how to walk and exploring different areas around the; hence play areas should be a safe haven and the homes and clinics should be free of clutter to avoid unnecessary falls which may result in injury to the teeth.

Conclusion

Just as Toddlers are finding their way in learning how to get things done, parents and clinicians alike also need to pave their way along the line in finding the best approaches to handling toddlers both at home and in clinical settings.

Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interest between authors.

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