

Going to the Doctor & Dentist

From the PBS website: www.pbs.org/parents/issuesadvice/talkingwithkids/health/doctor.html

Do your kids run away when you say, "It's time to go to the doctor?" Do you find yourself chasing them down and wondering if there are any easier ways to get out the door?

Pediatricians, dentists, family practitioners, and psychologists recommend a few basic communication strategies for preparing children for a visit: Be brief. Be positive. Be playful. Be honest in age-appropriate ways. Be in charge. And be calm.

Talking a lot in advance about going to the doctor or dentist is actually NOT recommended. "You have to take your cue from your child, but the more you discuss it, the bigger a deal it can become," recommends Dr. Kathie Teets Grimm, Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the Children's Advocacy Center of Manhattan. Kids should be prepared briefly if they are going to have a painful procedure. However, you might just prepare them on the way to the office unless your child has previously had a painful experience.

Pediatric dentists, like Dr. David Levine of New York City, provide a similar analysis, "Parents' memories are not children's reality today. A parent may come in and say her son is feeling scared of going to the dentist, but it's really the parent who is feeling scared. Dentistry has changed through the years in very positive ways. Kids can now look forward to comfortable and happy visits to the dentist."

The following tips may help you and your child feel better about going to the doctor, dentist, and even the hospital. Most of these strategies are geared for kids 8 and under. However, the principles apply to children of all ages (and even parents) who may be afraid of the visit.

Try these tips for preparing kids and getting them out the door:

Be brief. Talking too much or too explicitly may only scare your child. Tell a young child you are going to the doctor or dentist the morning of the visit, or even on the way. An older child can be prepared the day before, but keep it light.

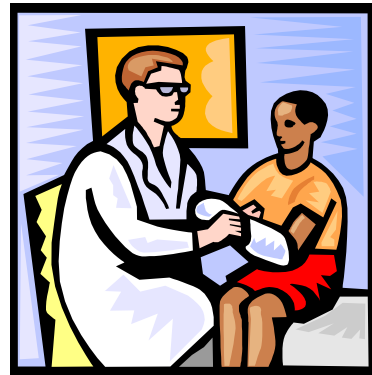
Don't focus on the pain in advance. Many kids already associate going to the doctor with getting a shot. If you tell a child (with best intentions) "You are going to the doctor or dentist and I promise you

it won't hurt!" the child will remember the hurt more than the promise.

Be honest. If you tell a child he won't get a shot, and then he does, he may feel duped. He then may resist going to the doctor the next time. If your child specifically asks, you might say, "I don't know if you will get an injection. If you do, it will only feel like a little pinch."

Describe what may happen. If your child asks, "Will it hurt?" answer in age-appropriate ways, but don't lie. Imagined pain may hurt more than the reality, because it provokes so much anxiety. You might say, "I don't know. We'll ask the doctor right away when we get there." (For specific explanations, consult the [Kid-Friendly Medical Dictionary](#).)

Be comforting and reassuring. Remind kids of any age that you will be there to comfort them. Let your child talk about her fears. Offer perspective with statements like, "I know you may be scared. The doctor will help you get better," or "We are going to the doctor to find out how healthy you are!" You might show a child her growth chart or the file from the doctor to demonstrate how she has grown.



Don't
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negoti-
going. If you let the going to the appointment become a negotiation, you may play this scene out time and time again. If your child refuses to go, acknowledge her feeling, but separate the emotion from the behavior. You might say, "I understand you don't want to go, but that does not change the fact that we have to do this now."

Offer incentives instead of rewards. It's normal

for kids to be afraid and cry on the way to the appointment. Doctors acknowledge that many parents do use bribes to get kids to the appointment, but most urge parents NOT to base rewards on good behavior. "Saying, 'Don't cry' or 'If you're good at the doctor, I'll buy you a toy,' sets up an unreal expectation," says Dr. Benjamin Kligler. "Since it's likely that your child will act out at the doctor or cry, telling him not to do so may only frustrate your child and you." Instead, Dr. Kligler suggests you offer an incentive like going to do a fun activity, and that you carry it out no matter how your child behaved at the visit.

Don't use going to the doctor as a punishment. "I have witnessed many parents say to kids, 'If you don't behave, I will take you back to the doctor and he will give you a shot!' or 'If you don't stop crying, I will take you to the doctor,'" reports Dr. Grimm. This only makes kids more scared of going.

Play-act going to the doctor and dentist at home. Together you can pretend to listen to your child's heart and lungs and examine her teeth. You might say positive phrases like "Count to three and the exam is done!" Let your child give you an exam as well, and examine a favorite stuffed animal. Encourage your child to bring the stuffed animal to the doctor for his own check up. Feel free to ask your doctor to examine the animal first, if you think it will comfort your child.

Explain as you go. If you have to rush to the ER or go to the hospital, explain in the moment why you are going. Reassure your child he will get well, he will be safe and that you will do this together.

Read books together. Some suggested books for young children are *The Berenstain Bears Go the Doctor*, *Elmo Goes to the Doctor*, *Madeline*, and *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*.

Try these helpful tips in the office and after you leave:

Remain calm when taking kids for exams. If possible, keep your anxieties under control, particularly if your child is acutely ill or injured. Kids take their cues from how their parents handle their health care. "I have observed many parents who unconsciously communicate their own anxieties to children. Sometimes, parents project lots of fear into an already intense situation. Some of this communication is verbal, and some is non-verbal," relates Dr. Benjamin Kligler.

Talk about what you see in the office. Look around and identify and discuss what you see. In

many doctors' and dentists' offices you can find 3D models of the body and mouth. Playing with these models can be both educational and soothing, as it decreases the anxiety associated with the visit.

Keep kids close. Hold your young child on your lap for as much of the doctor's exam as possible. Ask your dentist to position you as close to your child as possible. (But if you can, don't let your child hear you make this request.)

Accept your child's feelings. Doctors and dentists expect kids to get upset. So don't be surprised or embarrassed if your child has a crying fit or tantrum. Don't blame or shame your child for feeling this way.

Ask the doctor or dentist to explain what will happen. It helps to ask for an explanation BEFORE a procedure begins, so your child is prepared. In addition, you might ask the doctor or dentist to demonstrate a procedure in advance or to let your child play with safe equipment.

Do something fun when the visit is done. Doing this every time makes going to the doctor or dentist a fun expedition. If you turn this into a ritual, kids may even look forward to the event -- or at least to what comes after.