5 Tips for Dental Anxiety in Children | Core Dental

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Details:

Dental anxiety in children is common and there are practical steps parents can take. At Core Dental we suggest five: bring your child for a first check-up while they are young, keep your own worries and scary words out of the conversation, attend regular check-ups so visits become routine, prepare at home with positive language and stories, and let your child watch a trusted family member have a check and clean. Our team uses child-friendly language to keep young patients calm.

Why should you bring your child in while they are young?

One helpful way to prevent dental anxiety is to bring your child for a first check-up at a young age. A first dental visit can be as early as 12 to 24 months. Getting used to the dental environment and having their mouth and teeth checked is a big step for a young child. Even a brief check helps your child remember the experience, and that memory shapes future visits.

Introduce tooth brushing as soon as your child has teeth. Starting early builds a routine, and our top tips for children's dental hygiene explain how to look after small teeth at home.

How can you avoid passing your own dental worries to your child?

Children often develop dental anxiety because someone close to them, usually a parent or adult relative, has shared their own fear. Telling a child about your own bad experiences, or using scary phrases such as "they're going to give you a needle" or "you're going to get your tooth pulled out", can be very distressing for a young child.

Try to keep negative words out of conversations about the dentist. Describe the visit in simple, friendly terms, such as "the dentist is going to count your teeth and check that they are healthy". At Core Dental our dentists use child-friendly language to explain each step to your child.

How do regular check-ups help children feel at ease?

Visiting for a regular check and clean, usually every six months, helps a visit to the dentist become a normal routine. If a child only sees a dentist when something is wrong or when they have a toothache, they may link the dentist with pain and discomfort, and that can add to their anxiety. Your dentist will recommend a visit schedule that suits your child's needs.

Both parents and dental professionals play an important part in shaping a child's dental experience. Our team is trained to care for children, and we aim to make each visit calm and pleasant.

How can you prepare your child at home before the visit?

A little preparation at home can help:

Use positive language and framing when you talk about the dentist.

Read children's storybooks or watch cartoons that show friendly dentists.

Practise opening wide and counting teeth together at home.

Reward your child after the visit rather than before. A reward promised in advance can sound like a bribe and may suggest there is something to be afraid of.

What is role modelling and how does it help?

Role modelling is a gentle technique for easing dental anxiety. If a parent or sibling has a regular check and clean, bring your child along so they can watch a trusted person go through the visit calmly. Seeing someone they trust sit in the chair, have a check and leave happy shows a child that there is nothing to fear. Our team is happy for children to come along and look around before their own appointment.

What options are there for children who are very anxious?

Some children need extra support. Options may include a visit that focuses on getting comfortable, referral to a specialist paediatric dentist, or the use of happy gas during a visit where it is suitable. Your dentist will explain what might suit your child after talking with you. You can read about why we have specialist paediatric dentists and our children's dentistry services.

How can we help?

Our dentists, hygienists and specialists care for children across our nine clinics, and eligible children aged 0 to 17 may be bulk billed under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule. Call 13 13 16 or book online, and let us know if your child feels nervous so we can plan the visit around them.

The published tips, including the three about logistics

There is an official list of ways to make a child's dental visit go well, and three of its items are about scheduling rather than psychology. Those are the easiest to act on and the ones most often skipped.

The Victorian Department of Health's tips for positive dental visits, verbatim:

"Make sure you only say positive things about your dental experiences in front of children"

"Prepare your child for what to expect by reading story books about dental visits or by 'playing dentist' at home."

"Take your child with you when you have a dental check so that they can see what happens."

"Talk about dental visits being a part of their regular routine that helps to keep them healthy. Highlight the new, interesting, and fun aspects of visiting the dental clinic."

"Make dental appointments early in the day so your child is not tired."

"Arrive a little before the appointment time to let your child become familiar with the new surroundings."

"During the dental visit, let the dental practitioner have your child's full attention. They are trained to be gentle and make your child feel comfortable during the check-up."

"Combine the dental visit with a fun activity afterwards like a trip to the park or having a friend over to play."

Early in the day, because tired children cope worse. That is a booking decision, not a parenting skill, and it is free.

Arrive early so the room stops being new. Also free, and it converts the waiting room from dead time into familiarisation.

And the one that is harder than it sounds: let the practitioner have your child's full attention. The Department's reason is that "they are trained to be gentle and make your child feel comfortable during the check-up". A parent narrating, reassuring or interpreting is competing with the person doing the explaining — which is counter-intuitive, because reassurance feels like the helpful thing to do.

On what you say about your own visits , note that the Department's wording is absolute: "only say positive things about your dental experiences in front of children". Not "avoid scaring them" — only positive things, including the throwaway remarks that are not addressed to them.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental checks for young children, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 February 2026). Accessed 6 November 2026.

Why the visits themselves reduce the fear

The strongest argument for regular check-ups in a nervous child is not dental. It is that familiarity is built by repetition, and the published list of reasons for children's dental checks says so outright.

The Department's reasons that dental checks matter for children:

"the early signs of tooth decay and other problems can easily be missed by families"

"small problems can be treated before they become larger problems"

"they give you a chance to ask questions or talk about any concerns you may have"

"your dental practitioner can help your child avoid decay with treatments such as fluoride application and dental sealants"

"children get to know the dental staff and become familiar with the process of visiting the dental clinic"

That last item is the anxiety answer. Familiarity is listed as a benefit of the appointment itself, which means a check-up where nothing needs doing is not a wasted trip — it is the trip that makes the next one easier.

And the second item is why waiting backfires. Small problems treated early stay small. The Department's dental anxiety advice makes the same point for anyone of any age: avoiding the dentist leads to "a greater need for emergency care or more complex treatment", while regular visits help find problems early "so that simpler and less invasive treatments are needed". A child who only attends when something hurts learns that the dentist means pain.

There is no single correct interval. "Everyone has different oral health needs and risk levels that determine how often they should have a check-up. Talk with your dental practitioner about how often your child needs a check-up." Its headline rule is about starting, not frequency: "Every child should have a dental check by the time they turn 1", and "don't wait for a problem; regular dental checks are important for children".

If cost is part of why visits get delayed, there are two published routes. The Department describes the Commonwealth scheme: "The Commonwealth Child Dental Benefits Schedule (CDBS) covers some or all of the cost of basic dental treatments over a two year period for eligible children. A child is eligible if they are aged 0-17 years, are eligible for Medicare and you receive Family Tax Benefit Part A or another relevant Australian Government payment." It can be used "in the Victorian Public Dental Service or participating private dental clinics", and the Department points to Services Australia for more.

Note the eligible age range: 0 to 17, from the Department's own page.

On the public system, the Department records that public dental services are provided "through the Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne and over 50 integrated and registered community health services", and that "all children aged 0-12 can use public dental services at a low cost or for free, depending on their eligibility".

One practical caution about private fees. "Private dentists and dental practitioners set their own fees, which can vary depending on the practitioner and the type of treatment required." Where CDBS applies, the Department's advice is to check the detail: it lists as a condition that "the dental clinic you attend accepts the scheme (be sure to ask the clinic about any potential copayments)".

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Dental checks for young children, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 February 2026); Dental anxiety and phobia, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025). Both accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

When should my child have their first dental visit?

A first visit can be as early as 12 to 24 months. Bring your child along for a brief check so they can get used to the dental environment, and start brushing as soon as their first teeth appear.

Should I promise my child a treat for going to the dentist?

We suggest rewarding your child after the visit instead. A treat promised beforehand can sound like a bribe and may make a child wonder what is wrong. Praise and a small reward afterwards keep the focus on a job well done.

What words should I avoid when I talk about the dentist?

Avoid words that sound frightening, such as needle, pulled out or hurt, and avoid describing your own bad experiences. Use simple, friendly descriptions, and let our dentists explain each step in child-friendly language.

How often should children have a check and clean?

Regular visits, commonly every six months, help the dentist become a normal routine. Your dentist will advise a schedule that suits your child, based on their oral health and risk of decay.

Can a nervous child come along to watch a family member's appointment?

Yes. Bringing your child along to a parent's or sibling's check and clean lets them see a trusted person go through the visit. Please let our team know in advance so we can plan for them.

What time of day should I book my child's appointment?

Early. The Victorian Department of Health's advice is to "make dental appointments early in the day so your child is not tired", and to "arrive a little before the appointment time to let your child become familiar with the new surroundings".

Should I reassure my child during the appointment?

Less than instinct suggests. The Department asks parents to "let the dental practitioner have your child's full attention", on the basis that "they are trained to be gentle and make your child feel comfortable during the check-up".

What should I say about my own dental visits?

The Department's wording is strict: "Make sure you only say positive things about your dental experiences in front of children." That includes remarks not addressed to them.

Does a check-up where nothing needs doing achieve anything?

Yes, and the Department lists it as a benefit in its own right: "children get to know the dental staff and become familiar with the process of visiting the dental clinic." Familiarity is built by the uneventful visits.

How can I prepare my child at home?

"Prepare your child for what to expect by reading story books about dental visits or by 'playing dentist' at home", and "take your child with you when you have a dental check so that they can see what happens".

Is a reward afterwards a good idea?

The Department suggests an activity rather than a treat: "Combine the dental visit with a fun activity afterwards like a trip to the park or having a friend over to play."

When should the first visit be?

"Every child should have a dental check by the time they turn 1." And its general principle: "Don't wait for a problem; regular dental checks are important for children."

How often should my child be seen after that?

There is no single answer in the published advice. "Everyone has different oral health needs and risk levels that determine how often they should have a check-up. Talk with your dental practitioner about how often your child needs a check-up."

What help is there with the cost?

The Department describes the Child Dental Benefits Schedule, which "covers some or all of the cost of basic dental treatments over a two year period for eligible children". Eligibility is for children "aged 0-17 years" who are "eligible for Medicare" and whose family receives "Family Tax Benefit Part A or another relevant Australian Government payment". It can be used "in the Victorian Public Dental Service or participating private dental clinics", and the Department points to Services Australia for details. Separately, "all children aged 0-12 can use public dental services at a low cost or for free, depending on their eligibility".

Is there anything to check before assuming the scheme covers it?

Yes. The Department lists as a condition that "the dental clinic you attend accepts the scheme (be sure to ask the clinic about any potential copayments)", and notes that private practitioners "set their own fees, which can vary depending on the practitioner and the type of treatment required".

Related services and further reading

Children's dentistry

Why we have specialist paediatric dentists

Top tips for children's dental hygiene

Healthy snacks to help prevent tooth decay in children

5 tips for a healthier smile

What to expect at your first Core Dental appointment

Dental check-ups

Sleep dentistry

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans, with HICAPS on-site claiming at our clinics.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online through coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Bayside , Berwick , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Glenferrie , South Melbourne , Southbank , Wyndham

This article is general in nature and does not replace advice from a registered dental practitioner who has examined you. Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

At what age can a child first visit the dentist?

A child's first dental visit can be as early as 12 to 24 months. At Core Dental we welcome young children for a brief check so they can get used to the dental environment.

Why do some children feel anxious about the dentist?

Children often pick up dental anxiety from a parent or relative who shares their own fears or uses scary words. Visiting only when there is pain can also link the dentist with discomfort.

How can parents prepare a child for a dental visit?

Use positive language, read storybooks or watch cartoons featuring friendly dentists, and give a reward after the visit rather than before. Core Dental dentists then explain each step in child-friendly words.

What is role modelling in children's dentistry?

Role modelling means bringing your child to a parent's or sibling's check and clean so they can watch a trusted person have a relaxed visit. Core Dental is happy to welcome children to look on.

How often should children visit Core Dental for a check and clean?

Regular visits, commonly every six months, help the dentist become a normal routine. Your Core Dental dentist will recommend a schedule suited to your child's oral health.

What can Core Dental offer anxious children?

Options for very anxious children may include referral to a specialist paediatric dentist or happy gas where suitable. Core Dental dentists will discuss what might suit your child after talking with you.

Does Core Dental bulk bill children's dental visits?

Core Dental bulk bills eligible children aged 0 to 17 under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule. Ask our team about your child's eligibility when you book on 13 13 16.

How do I book a children's appointment at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au at any of our nine clinics. Tell our team if your child is nervous so we can plan the visit.