Help for a Child Frightened of the Dentist | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/help-kid-frightened-denist/

Details:

Many children feel nervous about the dentist, and there is plenty you can do at home to help. Making tooth brushing fun, brushing alongside your child, reading stories about friendly dentists, and keeping appointment details simple can all ease worries. At Core Dental we aim to make every visit calm and positive for children, and our teams explain each step in words your child can follow before we begin.

Why do some children feel afraid of the dentist?

Fear of the dentist often grows from the unknown, a noisy or unfamiliar room, or a past uncomfortable experience. Children also pick up on how the adults around them talk about dental visits. The aim is for your child to grow into an adult who is comfortable looking after their teeth, and that starts with every visit being a good experience.

How can you make tooth brushing more enjoyable at home?

Brushing time sets the tone for dental care. Here are some ideas that many families find helpful:

Let your child choose a fun, colourful toothbrush with soft bristles, perhaps featuring a favourite cartoon character.

Choose a toothpaste flavour your child likes, and ask your dentist about a toothpaste strength suited to their age.

Play a favourite song or use a timer so brushing lasts about two minutes.

Praise effort rather than perfection.

You can find more ideas in our article on top tips for children's dental hygiene .

Why should you brush alongside your child?

Grab your own toothbrush and brush with your child at the sink. When children see you brushing, it shows them that this is a normal part of the day and not a chore. It also gives you a chance to see how well they are brushing, and to step in with gentle help where it is needed. Children usually need an adult's help with brushing for several years, so this is a good habit to build early.

How can playtime help your child get used to the dentist?

Familiarity reduces fear. You could:

find a children's book that shows a friendly, helpful dentist and read it together

play pretend dentist at home, taking turns to count teeth with a toothbrush and a mirror

talk about the dentist in a positive, matter-of-fact way

visit the practice for a first look if your child would like to see the room

Short, relaxed, happy visits can help build trust before any treatment is needed.

How much should you tell your child about the appointment?

Try to keep it simple. Many parents find that over-explaining gives a child time to worry. Telling them it is a visit to count and check their teeth is usually enough, and the dental team can fill in the rest as it happens. Avoid words that might sound frightening, and avoid saying things like "it won't hurt" which may plant the idea of pain. Our team uses gentle, child-friendly language and a tell-show-do approach, where we explain, show and then do each step.

When should your child first visit the dentist?

Australian dental guidance commonly suggests a first visit by a child's first birthday or within about six months of the first tooth appearing. Early visits are often short and about getting comfortable. If your child is eligible, we bulk bill covered services for children aged 0 to 17 under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule. Read our CDBS guide for the details.

What if your child is still very anxious?

Some children need extra support. Please tell us when you book if your child is anxious, has had a hard experience, or has additional needs, so we can allow time and plan the visit. Specialist paediatric dentists attend some of our clinics, and sessions can change, so please confirm availability when you book. You can read more about why we have specialist paediatric dentists . For adults with strong fear, see our articles on fear of going to the dentist and managing anxiety before treatment .

Further detail from Core Dental

The following points are drawn from Core Dental's own published material on this topic. They are included here for completeness, and anything that applies to your own treatment should be confirmed with your clinician.

By showing them you are having fun brushing your own teeth (you might have to play up the actual 'fun' part a little) you will reinforce the message that it's not a chore. Head to your local bookshop and ask them for the kids book section. As with most things, kids should be kept on a strictly need-to-know basis when it comes to their upcoming Dental appointment. The details of their visit are best left to be discovered when they arrive (especially if it's their first time).

If you've got a particularly Nervous Nelly on your hands, and you have some spare time in the day drop by Core Dental and introduce your child to the team. The long car ride to a dental appointment can be fraught with tantrums and upheaval, so we suggest that you overcompensate when getting the car prepared.

Who can do the first check, and where

For a child who is already frightened, the most useful published fact is that the first look in their mouth need not happen in a dental chair at all. That lowers the stakes considerably.

The Victorian Department of Health: "All children should have their teeth and mouth check by the time they turn 1. This check can be done by an a qualified dental practitioner, such as an oral health therapist, dentist, dental therapist or dental hygienist."

And then the part worth knowing: "It might also be done by a trained non-dental health professional, such as a maternal and child health nurse, doctor or practice nurse. These professionals will refer your child to a dental clinic if necessary."

So the maternal and child health nurse you already see, or the GP your child already knows, can do the first check — in a room they are used to, with a person they are used to. A referral follows only "if necessary". For an anxious child, that sequence can do more than any amount of preparation for a clinic visit.

Why a check matters even when nothing is visibly wrong. The Department's first listed reason is about parents rather than children: "the early signs of tooth decay and other problems can easily be missed by families." Those early signs are genuinely subtle — the first sign of decay, on its own account, is "a chalky white spot on the tooth", a stage at which "the decay process can be reversed".

And the thing most likely to help a frightened child in the long run. The Department's dental anxiety page draws a distinction between children and adults that is worth taking seriously: "Children who have had bad dental experiences can likely overcome their fear if they are supported during further dental visits. Adults who are anxious about dental care tend to remain anxious throughout life."

Likely overcome their fear, if supported during further visits. The support has to come inside further visits, not instead of them — which is the uncomfortable implication, and the reason not to let a frightened child simply stop going.

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); Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Brushing at home: the handover, step by step

Toothbrushing at home is where a frightened child either gets used to having their mouth looked after or learns to resist it. The published guidance is specific about who holds the brush at which age, and it hands over later than most parents expect.

Start before there is much to brush. "As soon as the first tooth appears (usually at around 6 months of age) brush gently with a soft children's toothbrush and water (no toothpaste), or use a soft wet cloth to wipe over teeth and gums." The Department's reason for starting this early is habit as much as hygiene: "Making toothbrushing part of your child's daily routine forms the healthy habit that can set them up for a lifetime of healthy smiles."

You do it for them at first. "Young children are not able to brush their own teeth well enough so they need an adult to do it for them."

Then they try first and you finish. "At around age two or three, help them develop the skill by letting them have a go first before you follow up to make sure all surfaces have been cleaned."

That order matters for a resistant child: their turn comes first, yours comes after. It is a negotiation they can win part of.

And supervision continues for years. "You will need to help your child brush their teeth until they can do it well enough by themselves (usually about eight years old)." The Department's children's dental check page puts the same handover slightly more loosely — help them twice a day "until they are about seven or eight years old to make sure every surface gets cleaned well" — so treat it as a range rather than a birthday.

The technique, which is gentler than most people brush. "Brush the teeth and along the gum line to clean every tooth thoroughly (about two minutes is a good guide)." "Brush gently in small circles. Brush along the inside surfaces and the outside surfaces of teeth." "Brush back and forth on the chewing surfaces of teeth." And afterwards: "ask your child to spit out the toothpaste, and not to rinse with water. The small amount of toothpaste remaining keeps protecting teeth."

An electric brush can help, with a sequence that matters for a nervous child. The Department describes it as "a good alternative for some children aged over three years" and adds: "Guide the brush to your child's teeth first, then switch it on." Brush in the mouth, then the noise — not the other way around. It also cautions: "Do not press too hard or scrub, let the brush do the work."

How much toothpaste, by age. "For children 0-18 months of age - use only water, no toothpaste"; "from 18 months until the child turns six years old - use a pea-sized amount of children's toothpaste that contains fluoride"; "from six years of age - use a pea-sized amount of standard fluoride toothpaste". On flavour, which can decide whether brushing is a fight: "Non-mint flavours are fine but always make sure toothpaste contains fluoride as this is the key ingredient that protects teeth against decay."

One habit the Department singles out, with the mechanism explained. "Never putting children into bed with a bottle. As the child sleeps, milk can pool in the mouth and the lactose sugar in the milk feeds the bacteria that cause decay. Saliva flow is low during sleep, so does not protect against damage." Its decay page makes the same point about any sweet drink in a bottle or sippy cup, and offers an alternative for babies too young to brush: "wiping babies' teeth with a moist face cloth after their night bottle is best if they are too young to brush."

Playing dentist is official advice, not a gimmick. "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."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Toothbrushing - children 0-6 years, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 4 August 2026); Dental checks for young children, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 February 2026); Tooth decay, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 28 June 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

What should I say to my child before their first dental visit?

Keep it positive and brief. Tell them the dentist will count and check their teeth, and that you will be nearby. Avoid detailed explanations and scary words, because they can give a child extra time to worry before the visit.

Should I stay with my child during the appointment?

In most cases parents are welcome to stay with their child, and your presence can be reassuring. Tell our team if you think your child would respond to a different approach, and we can talk about what suits your family.

Can my child bring a toy or comfort item?

Yes. A favourite toy or blanket can help a child feel safe. Let our team know if there is anything that helps your child relax, such as a quiet voice, music or a break partway through.

What if my child will not open their mouth?

This is common and we do not force it. We slow down, explain, and let your child look at and hold the instruments first. Sometimes a short first visit is all that is needed, with treatment on a later day.

Will my child need treatment at the first visit?

Not usually. A first visit is mostly a look, a chat and, if your child is comfortable, a gentle clean. If treatment is needed later, we explain it to you and your child and quote before any treatment starts.

Does the first check have to be at a dental clinic?

No, and for a frightened child that matters. The Victorian Department of Health: the check by age one "can be done by an a qualified dental practitioner, such as an oral health therapist, dentist, dental therapist or dental hygienist", and "it might also be done by a trained non-dental health professional, such as a maternal and child health nurse, doctor or practice nurse. These professionals will refer your child to a dental clinic if necessary."

Will my child grow out of being frightened?

With support at further visits, the Department is reasonably hopeful: "Children who have had bad dental experiences can likely overcome their fear if they are supported during further dental visits." It contrasts this with adults, who "tend to remain anxious throughout life" — which is an argument for working through it now rather than waiting.

At what age should my child brush their own teeth?

Later than most people think. "You will need to help your child brush their teeth until they can do it well enough by themselves (usually about eight years old)." The Department's children's check page puts the same handover at "about seven or eight years old", so treat it as a range.

How do I get a resistant child to accept brushing?

The Department's sequence gives them the first turn: "At around age two or three, help them develop the skill by letting them have a go first before you follow up to make sure all surfaces have been cleaned." Before that age, "young children are not able to brush their own teeth well enough so they need an adult to do it for them".

When should I start cleaning my baby's teeth?

"As soon as the first tooth appears (usually at around 6 months of age) brush gently with a soft children's toothbrush and water (no toothpaste), or use a soft wet cloth to wipe over teeth and gums."

Is an electric toothbrush a good idea for a nervous child?

It can be, and the order of operations matters. The Department calls it "a good alternative for some children aged over three years", and advises: "Guide the brush to your child's teeth first, then switch it on." Also: "Do not press too hard or scrub, let the brush do the work."

How long should brushing take?

"About two minutes is a good guide" for cleaning every tooth and the gum line thoroughly, brushing "gently in small circles" on the inside and outside surfaces and "back and forth on the chewing surfaces".

Should my child rinse afterwards?

No. "Ask your child to spit out the toothpaste, and not to rinse with water. The small amount of toothpaste remaining keeps protecting teeth."

Why is a bottle in bed such a problem?

The Department explains the mechanism: "As the child sleeps, milk can pool in the mouth and the lactose sugar in the milk feeds the bacteria that cause decay. Saliva flow is low during sleep, so does not protect against damage." For a baby too young to brush, "wiping babies' teeth with a moist face cloth after their night bottle is best".

Does playing dentist at home actually help?

It is official advice rather than a gimmick: "Prepare your child for what to expect by reading story books about dental visits or by 'playing dentist' at home." The Department also suggests you "take your child with you when you have a dental check so that they can see what happens".

Can my child use a fruit-flavoured toothpaste if they hate mint?

Yes, with one condition. "Non-mint flavours are fine but always make sure toothpaste contains fluoride as this is the key ingredient that protects teeth against decay."

Related services and further reading

Children's dentistry

5 tips to help with dental anxiety in children

Top tips for children's dental hygiene

Specialist paediatric dentistry

Why we have specialist paediatric dentists

CDBS and bulk bill dentistry for children

What to expect at your first Core Dental appointment

Sleep dentistry

How can we help?

If your child is nervous about the dentist, our team can help at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 or book online and let us know about your child's worries, so we can plan the visit with care. Learn more about our children's dentistry and general dentistry services.

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.

Interest-free payment plans, HICAPS on-site claiming and bulk billing for eligible children under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule.

Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online via 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	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is general in nature and is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

How can I prepare my child for a first dentist visit?

Keep it simple and positive. Read a story about a friendly dentist, play pretend dentist at home and avoid scary words. Core Dental teams explain each step to your child in age-appropriate language before we begin.

Why does brushing together help a nervous child?

Brushing with your child shows that cleaning teeth is a normal part of the day. It also lets you see their technique and help gently. Core Dental recommends building this habit early.

How much should I tell my child about the appointment?

Many parents find a short, simple explanation works, because long explanations can give a child time to worry. Core Dental teams fill in the details during the visit using a tell-show-do approach.

What does tell-show-do mean at Core Dental?

Tell-show-do is a child-friendly approach where the team tells your child what will happen, shows them the instrument or step, and then does it. Core Dental teams use it to build confidence and reduce fear.

Does Core Dental have specialist paediatric dentists?

Specialist paediatric dentists attend some Core Dental clinics, helping children with complex needs, anxiety or medical conditions. Sessions can change, so please confirm the next available session when you book.

How do I book a child's visit at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online at coredental.com.au, and tell us about your child's worries. We are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings, with Sunday closed.

Can eligible children have bulk billed dental care at Core Dental?

Yes. Core Dental bulk bills covered services for eligible children aged 0 to 17 under the Child Dental Benefits Schedule. Medicare decides eligibility, so please check it before your visit.