**Encouraging Better Behavior at the Dentist: Tips for Dental Professionals**

1. **Pre-visit Consultations:** If feasible, establish pre-visit consultations for children with potential problematic fears, behavioral problems, or sensory concerns. Consider using a pre-visit questionnaire (e.g., <https://thecenterforpediatricdentistry.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Pre-Visit-Parent-Questionnaire1.pdf>) to standardize this process.
2. **Build Positive Associations**: friendly staff, age appropriate toys, positive dental imagery in waiting room, establish sensory adapted dental environment (SADE)
3. **Establish Expectations:** Try the following the help kids know what to expect from their visit
   1. *Direct observation*: allow child to observe cooperative parents or sibs during their visit
   2. *Video social stories*: e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3uZ_Weiow9k> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQi2F9nhuU4>
   3. *Visual schedules*: use simple pictures and words to tell the order of events of dental visit
   4. *Clinic tour*: allow child to ask questions
4. **Ask-Tell-Ask**:
   1. *Ask*: about child’s feelings toward the visit, child’s informational needs, child’s level of knowledge and understanding
   2. *Tell*: explain procedures through demonstrations/non-threatening, developmentally appropriate language
   3. *Ask*: if child the child understands and ask about how they feel about the treatment
5. **Tell-Show-Feel-Do**:
   1. *Tell:* what you are going to do and how it may feel
   2. *Show:* show any instruments you are going to use
   3. *Feel:* tell how it is going to feel/let child feel instruments if needed
   4. *Do:* perform procedure
6. **Give Effective Instructions**:
   1. Reduce distractions before giving a direction
   2. Say child’s name
   3. Use firm but friendly voice
   4. Be very clear about what you want the child to do
   5. State instructions as instructions, not questions
   6. Give only one direction at a time
   7. Praise/reward as soon as child complies
   8. Use when-then contingencies: “WHEN you let me clean your teeth, THEN you will earn a prize”
7. **Allow Scheduled Breaks**: Break procedures into chunks when feasible. Count down breaks as needed.
8. **Differential reinforcement**: reinforce positive behaviors (usually through praise, rewards, attention) while simultaneously reducing reinforcement for problem behaviors (e.g., tantrums)
9. **Exposure:** the process of facing fears is called *exposure*. With graduated exposure, a child repeatedly faces feared situations in a gradual and controlled way, until those situations no longer elicit as much of an anxious response.
   1. *Build your ladder*: Build an exposure hierarchy (fear ladder), which has 6-12 activities related to a goal
   2. *Rank you ladder*: Child ranks how much anxiety facing each step on the ladder would bring up, and rungs of ladder are ranked from most of least anxiety provoking

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| **My Goal: Have a calm voice and body while driving to dentist and sitting in waiting room for 15 minutes** | |
| **Situation** | **Anxiety**  **(0-10)** |
| **\*Drive to dental office, play in waiting room 15 min, tour dental office, including seeing dental chair, instruments** | 9 |
| **Drive to dental office, play in waiting room 5 min** | 8 |
| **Drive to dental office, walk in the waiting room and say hi to the receptionist** | 7 |
| **Drive to dental office, park in the parking lot for 5 min, then leave** | 6 |
| **Drive by the dental office** | 5 |
| **Watch a YouTube video about what to expect at the dentist:** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQi2F9nhuU4**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQi2F9nhuU4) | 3 |
| **Look at pictures of the dental office online** | 2 |
| **Read a social story about going to the dentist and explain why it is important. Review visual schedule of steps of dental visit.** | 1 |

* 1. *Climb your ladder*: Child engages in each exposure activity until anxiety is low enough to move up to the next rung on the ladder
  2. *Reinforce practice facing fears*: a token/reward system is used to motivate the child to practice their “bravery exercises”
  3. *Know when to get back-up*: You can encourage parents to work through exposure hierarchies at home for mild phobias that may be present. However, if a child has a severe phobia or behavioral problem, refer parents to a therapist with relevant experience. For more information visit: [www.anxietycanada.com](http://www.anxietycanada.com)

1. **Shaping**: rewarding successive approximations of a desired behavior. A child may have difficulty with performing the skills necessary for a successful dental visit (e.g., sitting in dental chair), even if they are not anxious. The same exposure hierarchies (example above) can be used to help children practice these skills in a step-by-step manner where they are reinforced for getting approximations of the end goal.
2. **Token systems:** Use token systems in your office to encourage good behavior. Have a prize box in your office with inexpensive prizes. Decorate the box so kids will be excited by it.
   1. *Choose behaviors to reward*: clear, observable, established ahead of time, appropriate for developmental level.
   2. *Give tokens*: give tangible tokens consistently and immediately after target behavior is performed
   3. *Cash in tokens for rewards*: having a visual rewards menu can help