Every parent wants a visit to the doctor or dentist with their child to be a calm and reassuring experience. Thoughtful preparation will help to bring this about. Try to allow plenty of time so that you are not stressed by needing to rush. Do take some books or small toys to keep the child occupied in the waiting room.

If the need arises, you could make a separate appointment to see the doctor without your child present so that you can discuss plans for treating or managing the child’s condition. Then the child should be involved to discuss it at the child’s own level.

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

It may help if you first of all take your child along with you when you have an appointment yourself so that the child is familiar with the dentist’s surgery. Talk to your child about the visit but don’t talk about it as if it is something to fear. It might be helpful to mention the visit the day before and then again an hour or so before leaving home. Encourage your child by telling him how grown up he is, now that he is old enough to go to the dentist. Explain about the dentist’s chair and that the dentist has special tools to examine teeth.

Find picture books in the library to read with your child, the more information you give them, the less likely the child is to be frightened. Role play using dolls can be helpful. You and your child can take turns to play the role of the dentist. If your child is very anxious, arrange to visit first and ‘ride in the chair’ without a dental examination. Perhaps take a soft toy or doll along for the dentist to examine. Most dentists will be happy to oblige - they would rather take it slowly at first than spend years battling with a terrified child. There are also dentists who specialise in treating children so see if you can find one in your area.

What do I say if my child asks, ‘will it hurt?’

If you know nothing painful is going to happen, it is obviously much easier to answer this question directly and honestly. However, if you think or know that your child may have to go through a painful procedure at the doctor or dentist, it is not advisable to say ‘it won’t hurt at all.’ By lying you will lose the child’s trust and this could affect your relationship. At the same time, you don’t want to frighten him. Saying ‘it might hurt a tiny bit’ but emphasising how quick it will be, and telling him how brave you know he is, is one way forward. Another is to focus on what you will do afterwards. Reassurance calmly and reassuringly and this may help to calm the child to the point where he can tell you what is worrying him. Acknowledge your child’s feelings and offer support and encouragement. He may feel safer if he knows that he can sit on your lap, for example.

Distraction, such as focusing on what you will do afterwards, is another option. You can also try giving your child a choice to make him feel more in control - for example, ‘would you like to walk in by yourself or would you like me to carry you?’ This should be said kindly - not as a threat! If this is a routine or first visit, it may well be enough to go into the surgery and just simply meet the doctor or dentist on this occasion.

nursery world
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Understanding the importance of a healthy diet, and how tooth decay can happen, is the first step to your child having a mouth full of healthy teeth.

Do milk teeth matter?
Yes they do! Though we lose our first set of teeth, they serve a number of key functions. First, they enable your child to eat properly. Second, they maintain the correct space for the permanent teeth to grow into. Third, they help your child to speak clearly (children who lose their milk teeth early may end up with speech problems). And fourth, they give your child a confident smile.

How should I care for my child’s teeth?
Your child’s teeth need to be cleaned twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste. This helps the mouth to remain healthy, which is important as an infection in a milk tooth can result in a dental abscess and the tooth being extracted.

Start cleaning your baby’s teeth when the first tooth comes through. Continue to help with cleaning until your child is around seven years old. Remember to brush all the surfaces: inside, outside and the flat chewing parts.

What is plaque?
Plaque is the sticky substance that naturally adheres to teeth. Careful brushing can remove it, but if it hardens it can only be removed by a dentist or hygienist. Plaque harbours millions of bacteria, allowing sugars to be turned into harmful acids very quickly.

Why is sugar so bad?
Our teeth are covered by a tough layer of enamel, which protects the softer, more sensitive, dentine inside. This enamel is very hard but can be broken down by the acids that are formed when bacteria in the mouth comes into contact with sugars from food. Children who are constantly exposed to sweet foods have their mouths bathed in these acids. Dentists advise regular mealtimes because the time-delay between eating allows the saliva to neutralise the acids.

But my toddler gets hungry between meals!
Most under-fives need a snack. Healthy options include: vegetable sticks, fresh fruit pieces, cubes of hard cheese, finger slices of wholemeal bread or toast, breadsticks or crackers.

What is fluoride?
Fluoride is a mineral that helps protect teeth. In some areas fluoride occurs naturally, while in others it’s added (in very low levels) to the water supply. Currently only 10 per cent of the UK population receives fluoridated water, but in the future, water companies may be required to do this. To find out if your water is currently fluoridated, contact your local water supplier.

Are there any books that we can read?
These are suitable for young children:
• Smile, Crocodile, Smile by An Vrombaut (OUP, £4.99)
• Tusk Trouble by Jane

Clarke and Cecilia Johansson (Hodder, £9.99)
• Topsy & Tim Go to the Dentist by Jean and Gareth Adamson (Ladybird, £2.50)
• Going to the Dentist by Anne Civardi and Stephen Cartwright (Usborne, £3.99)
• Freddie Visits the Dentist by Nicola Smee (Orchard Books, £3.99).

Dos and don’ts
DO brush your child’s teeth at least twice a day.
DO use a family fluoride toothpaste (only a pea sized amount).
DO take your child to visit a dentist regularly - twice a year is ideal.
DO offer only water or milk to drink.
DON’T give your baby a bottle after one year - use a cup instead.
DON’T give your baby a night-time bottle unless it contains plain water.
DON’T give your child sweet foods other than at mealtimes.
DON’T forget that fruit juices and fizzy drinks are just as bad for teeth as sweet foods, and keep dried fruit to mealtimes.