

Making Life Easier

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Going to the Doctor/Dentist

Doctor and dentist visits can be very stressful for young children. Routine check-ups can cause anxiety, fear and distress in toddlers and preschoolers. Some common fears for young children include:

- separation from you;
- pain and discomfort;
- stranger anxiety; and
- unfamiliar procedures and people.

The following tips will help ensure that these visits are easier for you and your child.

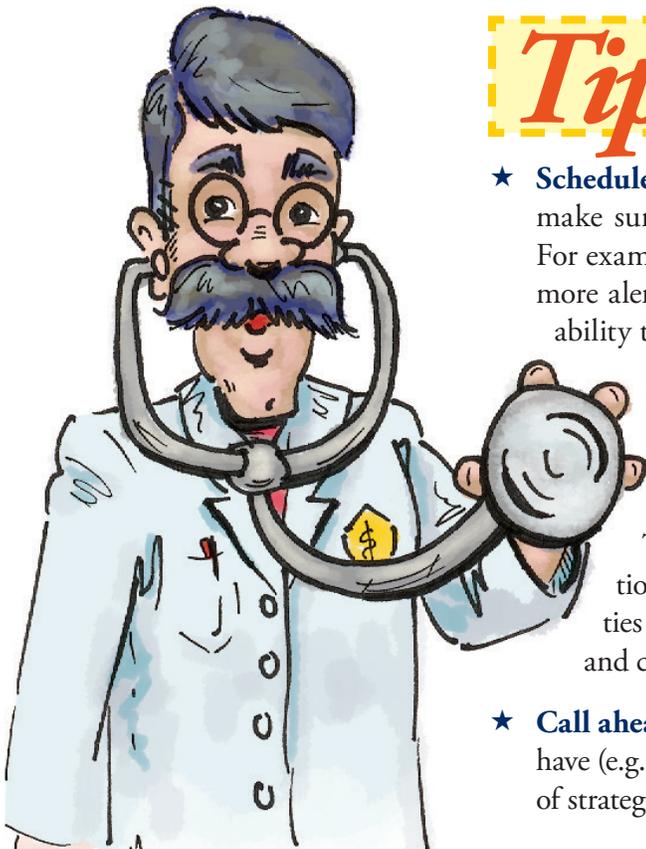


Tip: Prepare for the doctor/dentist visit.

★ **Schedule smartly.** When you make an appointment for your child, make sure to schedule a time that you believe will work well for him. For example, many children do best early or mid-morning when they are more alert. Avoid skipping naps or meals as this may lessen your child's ability to cope with any negative feelings he might experience.

★ **Choose well.** Choose a doctor/dentist who has experience working with young children and is open to making adjustments based on your child's special needs. Some doctors and dentists specialize in caring for children with developmental disabilities. This is especially important if your child has medical complications, communication and/or behavior challenges. Certain disabilities are at increased risk for dental problems (e.g., Down syndrome and cerebral palsy) and might need more frequent dental visits.

★ **Call ahead** and inform the staff of any special needs that your child might have (e.g., sensory issues, difficulty waiting, sensitive mouth and gums) and of strategies that work for him. Develop a plan with the staff for the actual



appointment. Be sure to focus on your child's strengths and strategies for success. You might want to have this conversation in person during a pre-appointment visit (see below).

- ★ **Pre-appointment visit.** If possible, stop by your doctor/dentist's office before your appointment date. If you are going to bring your child along for the visit, call the office and ask if you can meet the doctor/dentist and take a picture of your child and the doctor/dentist together. During the visit, check out the waiting room. Are there toys/books that your child would enjoy? Are the sights, sounds, or activity levels too stimulating for your child? If so, speak to the staff about other possible arrangements. Take pictures of people and objects in the waiting and/or examination rooms (e.g., fish tank, puzzles, books, the light over chair he will be sitting in, stethoscope, exam table, or other features) and create a personal picture story to read with your child in preparation for the actual visit. Read this to your child several times before the visit. Also, make sure to bring the picture story along to the visit as a reminder of what will happen, what the expected behaviors are, and what choices your child has. When children understand what is going to happen, they are less anxious which can increase cooperation and reduce challenging behavior.

Sample doctor/dentist routines are included with these tip sheets for you to use as a template for your child's personal picture story.

- ★ **Talk to your child about the appointment in advance.** Consider your child's individual needs and developmental level when deciding when to talk to him about the appointment. While some children may do well knowing a few days in advance, others may do better if told on the morning of the appointment.
- ★ **Role play the doctor/dentist visit** in advance using a doll or stuffed animal. Allow your child to take a turn at being the doctor, nurse or dentist. Show your child how the doctor/nurse will weigh him, measure his blood pressure, check his ears, nose and mouth. Demonstrate how the dentist or hygienist will look in his mouth, count his teeth and clean them. Do this



over and over again so that your child can understand the routine and procedures.

- ★ **Tell the truth.** Even young children can cope with discomfort or pain more easily if they're forewarned. You child will also learn to trust you if you're honest with him. If your child asks if he will get a shot or need medication, tell him the truth. Let him know what it might feel like and reassure him that you will be there for him. For example, use phrases such as "It will feel like a little pinch (a shot)" and "Daddy will be with you." If you need to leave the room, let him know where you will be.
- ★ **Share commercial books, television shows or videos** about visiting the doctor or dentist with your child. The pictures can help your child become familiar with what to expect at the visit and with the names of the objects and the people he may see at the office. A sample list of books follows these tip sheets. Your librarian or teacher/interventionist can help you find these as well as other books and videos.
- ★ **Pack a Waiting Bag.** Waiting in a doctor or dentist's office can be difficult for young children. Many parents find it helpful to take along a bag of favorite things for their child (e.g., books, markers and drawing paper, their personal picture story, doll or action figure, a comfort item or a sticker book). If possible, have your child help pack the bag so he can choose a few of the items himself. Providing choices for your child is a powerful strategy in preventing challenging behavior. You might say, "Do you want to take Mickey Mouse or blankie in your bag?"

- ★ **Read one of the other *Making Life Easier* articles, titled, *Running Errands*,** if getting your child in the car or on the bus for the trip is a challenge.

Tip: Remain calm and positive during the appointment.

Doctor and dentist visits can be stressful even for adults. It is important that your child sees that you are comfortable and confident in his doctor/dentist and staff. If your child becomes distressed during the visit, remember to respond calmly. Ask yourself what the meaning of the behavior is and what might have caused his distress. Once you understand the cause of your child's distress, you can respond with the appropriate strategy.

Tip: Inform staff of strategies that work.

When you interact with the staff of the doctor or dentist office, let them know that you will be using some strategies to encourage your child's cooperation and reduce the likelihood that your child will have behavior challenges. Office staff are usually more than happy to help make the visit go smoothly for the child.

Tip: Use support strategies to decrease the likelihood that behavior challenges will occur.

- ★ **Use your child's personal picture story.** The personal picture story can be read as you and your child are sitting in the waiting room and during the actual appointment with the doctor/dentist/hygienist as a reminder of what is going to happen next and his expected behaviors and choices. When children understand what is going to happen they are more likely to be calm which can reduce behavior challenges.
- ★ **Give clear directions.** Give your child a positive direction that assumes he will cooperate. For example, instead of saying "Manuel,

do you want to go see the dentist?" it is better to say, "We are going in the room to see the dentist. Let's go see what interesting things are in his room."

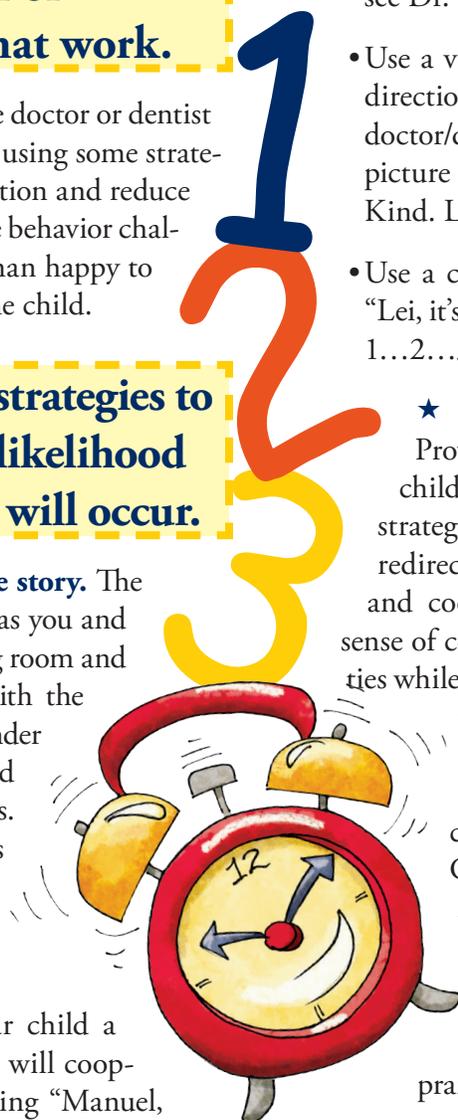
- ★ **Use "wait time."** A wait time of about 4 to 20 seconds is often all that is needed for a child to process and respond to a request. If your child hesitates, give him the wait time before you give another direction or demand that your child comply.

- ★ **Provide transition warnings.** Most young children need help transitioning from one activity to another, especially if they are engaged in an activity that is enjoyable. It's difficult for a child to move from an activity he really enjoys to one that he is uncertain of or does not like. To help your child transition, you might:

- Give your child a verbal warning. If he is playing with a puzzle, say "Maleek, I see the nurse. She called your name. I'll help you clean up. Let's go see Dr. Fares."
- Use a visual (picture) warning along with verbal directions. You might show a picture of the doctor/dentist or refer to your child's personal picture book and say, "Cooper, it's time to see Dr. Kind. Let's clean up and go see him."
- Use a countdown or count up strategy and say, "Lei, it's time to see Dr. Ortez. Let's count (pause). 1...2...3...4...5. Okay, let's go see Dr. Ortez."

- ★ **Provide choices, whenever possible.** Providing limited choices (two or three) for a child in a difficult situation can be a powerful strategy in preventing challenging behavior and redirecting a child to more acceptable behavior and cooperation. Choices help give children a sense of control over their surroundings and activities while still doing what needs to be done! Be sure that ALL the choices you offer are helping reach that goal! For example, if your child has to be examined or take medicine, you might say, "Charlie, let's help Dr. Care. You can sit on the table or sit on my lap. Then he will look in your ears."

- ★ **Provide frequent and specific praise.** Let your child know when he is being cooperative and helpful by praising him specifically for what he is doing.



For example, you might say, “Danny, you played and waited so nicely in the Waiting Room. Let’s tell Daddy.” “You were so brave. Now the shot is all done. No more shots.”

- ★ **Empathize with your child’s feelings.** If your child cries, hits, bites, screams or runs out of the waiting room or examination room, provide a label for how he might be feeling and reassure him. Avoid punishment or threats (e.g., “If you don’t sit still, I am going to spank you.” and negative, and usually, untrue comments “Big boys don’t cry.” or “There is nothing to be afraid of.” Let your child cry and comfort him by hugging, patting or using a soothing touch.
- ★ **Follow the appointment with an activity that your child likes** (e.g., a visit to the library or local park). Make sure this is something you can both enjoy together.
- ★ **Brag about your child’s behavior** to a family member or a friend in front of your child.
- ★ **Encourage your child to share his experience** with another adult such as a parent, grandparent, or friend.

Tip: Celebrate the little successes along the way.

In closing, please remember that the team of professionals that support you and your child will have additional specific ideas about how to help your child. Don’t forget to ask them! Your child’s speech and language therapist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, teacher, or other professionals should be able to help you think about the best way to support your child in their daily routines and community activities. They are usually more than willing to help you make any needed specific supports (for example, a waiting bag, a personal picture story, etc.). If your child is having persistent challenging behavior, you should ask the professionals who work with you to help develop a behavior support plan that will provide more specific strategies to prevent challenging behavior and help your child develop new social and communication skills.

Children’s Books to Prepare Your Child for Doctor/Dentist Visits

Your library and bookstore have many books that help children predict and understand what might happen during a doctor or dentist visit. These are some good examples.

- Going to the Doctor* by Terry Brazelton, MD. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1996.
- Going to the Dentist (Mr. Rogers)* by Fred Rogers. New York, NY: Putnam Juvenile, 1989.
- The Doctor’s Office* by Gail Saunders-Smith. Mankato, MN: Capstone Publishers, 1998.
- Next! Please* by Christopher Inns. Berkley, CA: Tricycle Press, 2001.
- The Berenstain Bears Go to the Doctor* by Stan & Jan Berenstain. New York, NY: Random House, 1981.
- I’m Going to the Doctor* by Willabel L. Tong. New York, NY: Ladybird Books, a Division of Penguin USA, 1997.
- I’m Going to the Dentist* by Willabel L. Tong. New York, NY: Ladybird Books, a Division of Penguin USA, 1997.
- Going to the Dentist* by Fred Rogers. New York, NY: Putnam’s Sons, 1989.
- Going to the Dentist* (Usborne First Experiences) by Anne Civardi, 2010.
- Show Me Your Smile!: A Visit to the Dentist* (Dora the Explorer). New York, NY: Nickelodeon Publishing, 2013.
- Harry and the Dinosaurs say “Raahh!”* by Ian Whybrow. New York, NY: Random House Books for Young Readers, 2004.

Making Life Easier: **Going to the Doctor/Dentist**

★ **Prepare for the doctor/dentist visit.**

- **Schedule a time** that will work for your child.
- **Choose doctor/dentist** who has experience working with children with special needs.
- **Call ahead** to inform staff of child's special needs.
- **Visit the office** in advance.
- **Role play** the doctor/dentist visit
- Tell your child **what to expect.**
- **Pack a bag of favorite items** to take with you.
- Create a **personal story.**
- **Remain calm and positive** during the appointment.

★ **Inform staff** of helpful strategies.

★ **Use strategies** to decrease likelihood that behavior challenges will occur.

- Give **clear directions.**
- Use **"Wait time."**
- Provide **transition warnings.**
- Provide **limited choices.**
- Provide **frequent and specific praise** for acceptable behavior.
- **Empathize** with your child's feelings.
- Follow the appointment with an **activity your child enjoys.**
- **Encourage your child** to share his experiences.

★ **Celebrate** the successes along the way.