



No Tears No Fears Basic Recommendations

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Many parents find it helpful to discuss a dentist or doctor visit the night before. Too much time before the visit can increase anxiety. Sometime during dinner, where the child will still have a hour or two to ask questions and have them answered can be useful. Many parents have found the Dora the Explorer book about going to the dentist helpful.

I don't have to remind you that if you are tense or apprehensive about a visit, your child will pick up on that. If you are apprehensive, you probably have negative memories of your own that interfere with staying calm while bringing your child for a visit. Sometimes, just acknowledging the difficulty can go a long way. Something like, wow, I get a little bit nervous when I take you to the doctors office, did you know that?

Your child may express fear or worries. This is so difficult for every parent. We all wish we could spare our children discomfort. Many of us know that discomfort prepares us for being sturdy adults who can cope with adversity. The surest route to helping your child feel sturdy is to acknowledge how they feel, and convey to them that you feel sure they can cope. That sounds something like: "I know you don't like going to the doctors office, you worry something will hurt, but I know you will be fine." As a parent, I'm sure you know how to edit that line so that it is age appropriate.

One piece of advice is to leave it to the doctor or dentist to describe the actual procedures. This is crucial. If your child asks about needles or shots, just tell them, you will have to wait to see what the doctor says, and that the doctor will explain everything. This way the doctor has the ability to describe things as they will occur, and you won't have told your child a story that conflicts with what the doctor is saying or doing.

The final piece of advice is about containment. That is a psychological concept that relates to helping a child feel wrapped in sturdy dependable care. Containment does not mean creating a world that is pain free for a child. That just doesn't exist. Any parent who tries to convey to their child that they will be protected from discomfort will ultimately be lying to their child, and this will erode the child's trust. When you acknowledge a child's feelings, and then reassure them, they feel contained. Many parents only take one of the two steps towards containment.

They acknowledge their child's feelings, and may even get as upset as the child. Or they reassure, to the point of minimizing or dismissing their child's experience. Both of these responses tend to increase a child's distress.

The child whose parents acknowledges only their distress gets more upset. The child knows that you know how they feel. Your child is looking to you to then say, everything is going to be OK. You can say that with complete authority that whatever discomfort the child feels today in the dental chair will not be the same tomorrow. They may have residual discomfort the next day, but even that will pass. Your child wants you to tell them that this isn't a permanent condition and that it won't kill them. Please refrain from mocking your child about their worries or reactions.

The child who is told too soon that it's all going to be OK will feel that you don't know that they were scared or felt some pain. They will have to up the volume and scream louder so that they know you heard them.

Containment is a two step dance. Acknowledge the discomfort, and when the child looks to you for your reaction, offer reassurance.

If all of this doesn't work, you might want to ask for some input into what may help your child feel more comfortable.