

SproutSmile

First Dental Visit Checklist

Everything to do before, during, and after your child's first visit



A free parent guide from SproutSmile - sproutsmile.com

SproutSmile helps you find a pediatric dentist for your child, free and in your language. We are not a dental office and this is not medical advice.

Your child's first dental visit

A first dental visit can feel scary, but it's usually short, gentle, and mostly about learning and prevention. Here's what typically happens and when to go—plus tips to keep it calm for your child.

Overview: what your child's first dental visit is for

A baby or toddler's first dental visit is a chance to start dental care early. It helps the dentist check how teeth and gums are developing, learn about your child's needs, and guide you on daily habits that can prevent cavities.

In the U.S., a common recommendation is to schedule the first visit by age 1 or by the time the first tooth comes in (whichever happens first). If your child already has teeth, don't wait—call and ask for an early “new patient” visit.

We're SproutSmile. We're a FREE service that helps you get matched with a pediatric dentist in your area. We can help you choose a dentist that sees young children and fits your family's needs.

What to expect at the visit (usually quick and gentle)

Every practice is a little different, but a first visit for a baby or toddler often focuses on comfort and prevention. The dentist (or pediatric dental team) will look at your child's teeth and gums, check for early signs of cavities, and make sure everything is developing normally.

The team may also talk with you about feeding and tooth-friendly routines, how to brush, and fluoride. Many dentists recommend fluoride toothpaste and may recommend fluoride varnish during visits to help strengthen tooth enamel.

If your child is very young, the dentist may not do X-rays right away. If imaging is needed, the team will explain what's recommended for your child's age and situation. For comfort, some kids may be given nitrous oxide (“laughing gas”) or other sedation options by the dentist when appropriate—your dentist will tell you what they offer and what they recommend.

Tip: the visit may feel mostly like “getting to know you and your child” rather than a long exam. It's okay if your child is nervous. The goal is a positive start.

When to go and how to choose a dentist who sees babies

If you're wondering when to schedule, a good rule is: aim for the first visit by age 1 or when the first tooth appears. This timing helps dentists catch problems early and build a routine.

When you call, ask if the office sees infants and toddlers regularly. You can also ask about how they help kids feel comfortable—things like short appointments, a “tell-show-do” approach, or a parent-friendly plan for calming your child.

To find a pediatric dentist that fits your needs, you can use get matched with a dentist on SproutSmile. You can also read how to choose a pediatric dentist for helpful questions to ask before you book.

Cost range and how insurance, Medicaid, and CHIP can help

The cost of a first dental visit varies by location, the dentist’s pricing, your child’s age, and what’s done at that visit. In many cases, preventive visits may be covered by dental insurance.

If you’re using Medicaid or CHIP (children’s health coverage programs), children’s dental benefits are often available for eligible families. Coverage rules vary by state, and the exact services covered can differ.

For a clearer sense of what families typically pay, see costs in your area. Any numbers you see are estimates, not a guaranteed quote. The best next step is to ask the dental office what the expected visit includes and what your plan covers.



Preparing for your child's first dental visit

A first dental visit can feel like a big step, especially for a baby or toddler. A little planning can make the day smoother and help your child feel safe, calm, and ready.

When should your child have a first dental visit?

Most children should see a dentist by age 1, or within 6 months of the first tooth coming in. That can sound early, but baby teeth matter. They help with eating, speech, and saving space for adult teeth.

The first visit is often short and simple. It gives a dentist a chance to look at how your child's teeth and gums are growing, talk with you about cleaning and feeding habits, and help prevent cavities before they start.

If your child already has tooth pain, swelling, an injured tooth, or dark spots on the teeth, do not wait for a routine visit. Talk to a licensed pediatric or general dentist as soon as you can.

- First visit: by age 1 or first tooth
- Baby teeth are important, even though they fall out
- Early visits can help prevent bigger problems later

What usually happens at the first visit

For many babies and young children, the first visit is more about getting comfortable than doing a lot of treatment. A dentist or team member may ask about brushing, bottles, sippy cups, snacks, thumb sucking, and whether your child drinks tap water or uses fluoride toothpaste.

The dentist will usually count the teeth and check the gums, bite, and mouth. For very young children, this may happen with your child sitting on your lap. Some offices use a "knee-to-knee" position, where you and the dentist help your child feel secure during the quick exam.

The office may clean the teeth, if needed, and may place fluoride varnish to help protect against cavities. Some children also need X-rays, but not always at the first visit. That depends on age, visible problems, and the dentist's judgment.

If your child is older and nervous, the visit may still be simple: look, count, clean, and talk. Pediatric dentists are used to short attention spans, tears, and wiggles. A hard first visit does not mean future visits will go badly.

- You may stay with your child during the visit
- The exam is often quick and gentle
- Fluoride treatments can help prevent cavities

How to prepare at home

Start with the way you talk about the visit. Keep your words calm and simple. You can say, "The dentist will count your teeth and help keep your mouth healthy." Avoid scary words like "shot," "drill," "pain," or "it won't hurt." Even well-meant promises can raise worry.

Try a short pretend play at home. Let your child open wide while you count teeth with a toothbrush or clean finger. Read a picture book about a dental visit, or let your child watch you brush and say, "We take care of our teeth every day."

Choose a good time of day if you can. For young children, that often means a morning visit, after sleep and after a light meal. Bring comfort items like a favorite stuffed toy, pacifier, or blanket if the office allows it.

If your child is old enough to ask questions, answer honestly but briefly. You do not need to explain every tool. Too much detail can make some children more nervous. If you need help finding an office that sees children, we can help you get matched with a pediatric dentist.

- Use calm, simple words
- Practice opening wide at home
- Pick a time when your child is usually rested

Common mistakes parents make

One common mistake is waiting too long. Some parents think baby teeth are not a big deal because they fall out. But cavities in baby teeth can still cause pain, infection, trouble eating, and trouble sleeping.

Another mistake is using the dentist as a threat. Saying "If you don't brush, the dentist will be mad" can make the office feel scary before your child even gets there. It helps more to frame the visit as normal care, like a checkup.

Some parents also bring a hungry, tired child and hope for the best. That can make a tough moment even harder. A snack, nap, and a little extra time can make a real difference.

It also helps not to share your own dental fears in front of your child. Many adults have had stressful dental experiences. Your child does not need that picture in their mind before a first visit.

- Do not wait until there is pain
- Do not use the dentist as a punishment
- Try not to bring your own fear into the room



Helping an anxious child at the dentist

If your child gets nervous about the dentist, you're not alone. This guide shares common reasons kids feel scared and simple things you can do to help your visit feel calmer.

Why kids get scared at the dentist (and it's not "bad behavior")

Dentist visits can feel scary for many children. New smells, unfamiliar sounds, bright lights, and being in a chair can all feel overwhelming—especially if it's the first time.

Some kids also worry about pain, choking, or the idea of "something in their mouth." Even if you try to explain, your child may not know what will happen next. Anxiety grows when things feel uncertain.

Most dental checkups for kids are about prevention and comfort. A gentle pediatric dentist plans the visit around your child's needs and the pace of the appointment—so your child can feel safe and in control as much as possible. We help you get matched with a pediatric dentist who works with kids every day.

What a gentle pediatric dentist actually does to keep things calm

A caring pediatric dentist and their team usually start by getting to know your child in a friendly way. They may talk in simple words, show tools without using them yet, and explain what will happen step-by-step.

Many kids do better with a "tell-show-do" approach. That means the dentist may show a mirror or brush first, then do a small part, then check in. You can ask the team how they handle nervous kids before you schedule.

If your child is very anxious, dentists may use comfort tools such as numbing options for the mouth. Dental teams also commonly use nitrous oxide ("laughing gas") for some children to help them relax during certain visits, depending on the situation. Your licensed dentist will decide what's appropriate for your child.

Prevention matters too. For example, fluoride and dental sealants can help prevent cavities, and those preventive steps can often reduce the chance of more stressful procedures later.

What you can do at home and in the waiting room

Start simple and calm. Use short phrases your child can understand, like: "We're going to check your teeth. You can take breaks. I'll stay right here." Avoid long explanations right before the appointment.

Practice a "brave routine" at home. You can let your child sit in a chair, open their mouth for a few seconds while you count, and reward the effort—nothing big, just a small celebration. If your child is nervous about the chair, bring a comfort item from home (a small toy or blanket) and ask the

office ahead of time about what's allowed.

In the waiting room, keep expectations steady. Choose something relaxing to do together—read a short book, look at a familiar show on your phone, or do quiet breathing with your child. Try not to discuss the hardest parts of dental visits in front of them.

If your child asks scary questions, answer honestly but gently. For example, “You might hear tools, but we will pause if you need a break.” If you're not sure how the visit will go, it's okay to say, “The dentist will tell us what's next when we get there.”

Common mistakes that can make anxiety worse

Many parents mean well, but a few common moves can increase fear. Avoid promises like “It won't hurt at all.” Instead, you can say, “The dentist will help keep you comfortable, and we can take breaks.”

Try not to describe scary experiences you've heard from other kids. Hearing secondhand stories can make your child imagine the worst before they even sit in the chair.

Another mistake is leaving your child in charge of guessing. If they don't know what to expect, uncertainty can feel bigger. Bring calm, clear information, like: “First we check your teeth. Then we clean and count. After that, we pick a sticker.” You can also ask the team what the visit will include.

If your child had a bad experience before, don't ignore it. Tell the dentist what your child found hard (for example, “the noise” or “being held down” or “not knowing what comes next”). This is general communication, not medical advice—still, it helps the team plan a gentler approach. If you're scheduling a first visit, you may find this helpful: first visit by age 1 or first tooth.



Your quick action list

- 1 Decide what your child needs (first visit, cleaning, a worry, or an emergency).
- 2 Get matched, free, with pediatric dental offices near you at sproutsmile.com.
- 3 Ask each office whether they accept your insurance or Medicaid/CHIP.
- 4 Ask how they work with children and what a visit will cost.
- 5 Choose the office that feels right - you make every decision about your child's care.



Find a pediatric dentist near you, free, at sproutsmile.com