Crying at the dentist is very common.

There is no need to blame your child for crying. What matters is not letting "the dentist = a scary place" take hold.

About 1 in 3

children aged 2–6 are afraid or anxious about the dentist

This comes from a review of studies worldwide. Children who had never been to a dentist tended to be more afraid or anxious.[1] Fear has more than one cause: a painful dental experience in childhood, and the child's temperament, can both play a part.[2] Parents who had painful dental experiences may also pass their own fear on to their children.[3]

First, getting used to the dentist

From the US pediatric dentistry guideline[3]

1 Tell, show, do

Explain in words the child understands, show how the tools look, sound, smell and feel, then do exactly what was explained

2 Step by step

Look around the treatment room, over several visits. Move a little closer to what is scary, and go on to the next step once they manage

3 Praise

Praise specific things they did, such as "Thank you for sitting so still"

The order of steps and the number of visits before treatment are decided for each child, and also depend on how urgent the decay is. **There is no set number of visits.**

Non-urgent treatment can sometimes wait

Treatment can sometimes be delayed

Dental disease is usually not life-threatening, so the type and timing of treatment can sometimes be delayed. In the meantime, the dentist may apply a medicine that slows decay, place a temporary filling, or apply fluoride.[3]

When treatment comes first

When disease is progressing quickly, or there is an injury, pain, swelling or pus, treatment is usually done early.[3] Even if your child is scared, early treatment is needed.

When is a child held still, or given general anesthesia?

Holding still (protective stabilization)

The child's body is held, or wrapped with a special board, so they cannot move during treatment. It may be used when treatment is urgent and a child truly cannot cooperate, but **not for a child who has no clear need to be treated that day**. Parents must be told about it and give consent first, and can ask to stop at any time.[4]

General anesthesia

Used for children who are too afraid to cooperate, or who need a lot of treatment done quickly.[3] It is done in pediatric dentistry departments, such as at university hospitals. If you are worried, ask the dentist beforehand.

From your clinic A clinic stamp is fine for contact details

Phone _____

Opening hours _____

Notes _____

Today ☐ Came into the room ☐ Sat in the chair ☐ Opened wide ☐ Saw / touched the tools ☐ Fluoride / brushing ☐ Treatment

Next visit ☐ Practice visit ☐ Treatment ☐ Check-up Date: Time:

References [1] Sun IG, et al. Global prevalence of early childhood dental fear and anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis. J Dent. 2024;142:104841. [2] Beaton L, et al. Why are people afraid of the dentist? Med Princ Pract. 2014;23(4):295-301. [3] American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. Behavior guidance for the pediatric dental patient. The Reference Manual of Pediatric Dentistry. 2025:379-399. [4] American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. Use of protective stabilization for pediatric dental patients. The Reference Manual of Pediatric Dentistry. 2025:400-406.

Written by a practising dentist (Zubora Ha Lab, Japan) · November 2026 edition

If your clinic's instructions differ, follow your clinic. Free to use; terms of use: zubora-lab.com/sheets/ (Japanese)

Never use the dentist as a punishment. Praise what they managed.

What you can do at home

1 Not a punishment

If the dentist is used as a punishment, children learn that it is "a scary place you go when you've been bad".

2 Use rewards

Give a sticker or token for each effort and swap them for a reward later. The guideline lists this as a method suitable for every child.[3]

3 Get to know it first

Look at picture books, videos, or your dental clinic's website. Show them how to open wide, and practice together at home with a mirror.[3]

Be specific when praising[3] "Good job" alone ▶ **"You kept your hands on your lap. Great job!"**

Things not to say · Common myths

Don't say

"If you don't behave, the dentist will give you a shot."

At home, use rewards and praise for what they did. If you have said it before, it's fine as long as you stop from today.

Myth

"Rewards are just bribes and spoil children."

Rewards are a method in the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry guideline.[3] They recognize effort and help with the next visit.

Myth

"A visit where they only cried was wasted."

Sitting in the chair, opening wide, looking at the tools: each is a step. Please bring them again.[3]

Myth

"Better to hold them down and fix it quickly."

For decay that is not urgent, waiting until they are used to it, or slowing it down in the meantime, is also an option.[3] Talk it over with the dentist.

Should a parent come into the treatment room?

It depends on the child. Dental clinics have different approaches, so ask at the start.

When to see a dentist

See a dentist now

- Your child **has tooth pain**, or the gums or face are **swollen**
- A tooth was **hit**, chipped or knocked out

Even if your child is scared, early treatment is needed.[3]

Ask for advice soon

- A tooth has a **black dot, a brown area or a cloudy white area**
- After several visits, **treatment still can't start**
- Your child has **never been to a dentist**

Starting before anything hurts gives them time to get used to it.

Clinic contact (stamp is fine)

Notes

References

[1]–[4]: see page 1

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