



When Do You Need a

# General Dentist vs. a Specialist?



## **Most parents realize the importance**

of helping their kids get off to a healthy start when it comes to taking care of their teeth. They put in the time to help them learn good brushing habits, and maybe even help instill some flossing habits. They also know that at some point they will need to start seeing a dentist, an orthodontist, and maybe even another specialty. With the variety of options that are available, some parents are left wondering which one is the best route to take for their child. The more you know about what each one is and does, the more the choice becomes clear.

There are two common routes that parents can take when it comes to the dental health of their children. They can stay ahead, taking the proactive approach, focusing on preventative measures that help to keep their child's teeth healthy; or they can fall behind, taking a more reactive approach, doing their best to fix problems that arise. It's always a better route to help *prevent* things like cavities, rather than having to focus your efforts on treating them if your child gets them. By taking a more preventative route to your child's dental health, you will end up saving money and time, and they often will end up going through less treatment.



## Good Dental Hygiene Habits

It's never too early to start teaching children good oral hygiene habits. Even as infants, parents can do things to start protecting their child's teeth. Using a soft-bristle toothbrush, parents can help brush an infant's first teeth at least once per day, especially before bedtime. This will help to remove plaque and get baby started with the idea that their teeth need to be cleaned daily.

As parents begin seeing the first tooth appear, they may be busy grabbing the camera to snap as many cute photos as they can, but at the same time, they will want to get started with having their child's teeth checked out. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that a child should have their first dental checkup when their first tooth appears, or by their first birthday. While many may find this early, it's ideal so that it helps to prevent problems down the road.

As children become toddlers and are able to take on more of a role in helping to keep their teeth brushed, parents should still help them daily in order to ensure that it gets done properly. According to the National Institutes of Health, around the age of two, children can start using toothpaste to brush their teeth. Select a variety that has fluoride in it to help protect against cavities, and then use a pea-sized amount on their toothbrush, which is all they need.

As children begin growing and go from the elementary years to middle school and beyond, it is important for parents to continue instilling healthy oral hygiene habits. This will help kids get off to a good start and lay the foundation for healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

In addition to daily brushing, there are other things that parents can do to help kids get off to healthy start with their teeth, including limiting sweet snacks and sugary drinks, giving them healthy foods to eat, and taking them for regular dental checkups.

## Tips for Helping Your Child Have Good Oral Health

■ **Start taking your child for dental checkups** when their first tooth appears or by their first birthday.

■ **Keep your child going for regular checkups and cleanings** twice per year to help remove plaque from their teeth, and have them get fluoride treatments.

■ **Starting as an infant, clean their teeth daily.** Once they are toddlers, give them a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste to brush twice a day, and especially before bedtime.

■ **Limit the amount** of sugary drinks and snacks, and get them eating healthy foods.

■ **Make sure they see an orthodontist by the time they are seven** so they can address any tooth and jaw alignment issues while the teeth are still growing. The younger children are, the more compliant with treatment they also tend to be. Both of these contribute to why more people are now getting kids started with braces at a younger age.

## Choosing a Doctor

When it comes time to find an oral doctor to take your child to for a checkup, you have a variety of options. But unless you know the differences between them, you may be lost trying to navigate your way. Knowing the different types of options, you can make an informed decision on where to go and who to see, further helping your child to get a great start in taking care of their teeth.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that children get dental checkups at least twice per year. Some children may need them more frequently if they have poor oral hygiene, unusual growth patterns, or are at an increased risk for tooth decay. By visiting the dentist twice per year, you will be increasing the chances of your child staying cavity-free and having healthy gums and teeth. By having their teeth professionally cleaned, the debris will be removed that would otherwise build up on the teeth and cause irritation and lead to cavities. Plus, at their checkups, they will be given good hygiene instruction as well as fluoride treatments, which will help to strengthen their teeth and prevent cavities.

■ **Always choose the right doctor for your child's situation.** Treatment is an investment in their smile and should not be trusted to anyone who doesn't have the proper education to successfully treat them.

■ **Notice if your child has issues with their teeth or smile** that may be leading to them being bullied, even if they are not reporting it. A great smile makes a world of difference in a child's confidence while they are growing up, and well into adulthood.

■ **Always set a good example of what good oral health care looks like.** Your children are watching and paying attention more than you may realize.



Here are some of the most common options you will find, along with what you would see them for:

- **General Dentist.** A general dentist is one that has graduated from dental school. The services they provide are cleaning teeth, fixing cavities, and doing general checkups for general oral health. Many general dentists will not begin seeing children for checkups until they are seven, eight, or even ten years old. While many families start out at a general dentist, they often get referred to other specialists for more advanced care.
- **Pediatric Dentist.** A pediatric dentist is considered the pediatrician of dentistry. They have had two to three years of additional training beyond dental school. It is a specialty area that focuses on the oral health of younger people. They also focus on preventative measures, but they have a more in-depth understanding of children's teeth and how to work with children. They may explain things by using pictures and words that your child can understand and may have an office that is decorated and designed in a way that makes kids feel more comfortable. Rather than a clinical feel, it may have ocean murals painted on the walls and magic shows. They have extensive experience with infants through teens, including

working with those who have special needs. Their services include checkups, preventative measures, cleanings, fixing cavities, and caring for dental injuries, such as a tooth being knocked out. Additionally, a pediatric dentist may use sedation dentistry, where children are given a medication to help them feel more relaxed during treatment.

- **Orthodontist.** An orthodontist is a specialist who has received two to three years of education beyond dental school. They are experts at straightening teeth and aligning the jaws. They see young children through adults, assessing the need for treatment to straighten the teeth or align the jaws. Many people take their children to see the orthodontist for braces because they want to help them have a beautiful smile that helps them feel confident. Others may take their children to them because there are underlying issues that need to be addressed, such as having an underbite or overbite, having a thumb-sucking problem, being a mouth breather, or because their child is swallowing abnormally. Although others may try to offer parents braces for their children, the best route to take if your child needs braces is always to see an orthodontist. They are specialists in straightening the teeth, so you will have a much higher success rate by sticking with them.

**General Dentist.** A general dentist gives routine checkups, preventative measures, cleans teeth, and fixes cavities. They may not start seeing children until they are seven to ten years old.

**Pediatric Dentist.** A pediatric dentist has two to three years of specialized education beyond dental school. They specialize in providing dental care to children and adolescents, offering checkups, preventative measures, cleanings, and cavities.

**Orthodontist.** An orthodontist has two to three years of specialized education beyond dental school and is an expert at straightening teeth and aligning the jaws. They assess patients and determine the best treatment route to straighten their teeth and align their jaws.

Often times, parents start off going to a *general dentist* and then get referrals to specialists. Along with getting a referral to see an *orthodontist*, there may be other specialists they are referred to, depending on the issues at hand. For example, there are *endodontists*, who are specialists in treating tooth pain and performing root canals, and there are *oral and maxillofacial pathologists and surgeons*, who are doctors who specialize in disease management and surgery.

You may find that a *pediatric dentist* office may also have an orthodontist on staff. That may be the best of both worlds under one roof, so long as each doctor is certified in their respective areas. Be leery of a den-

tist who may be pushing to take care of putting your child into braces. If they are not an orthodontist, then they do not have the specialized orthodontic training to know how to expertly straighten your child's teeth. If your dentist is recommending braces and wants to take care of it in their office, make sure they have an orthodontist on staff, or go to an orthodontist for a second opinion. It's always better to be safe and ensure that your child is receiving the best possible care. Remember, you are your child's best health advocate, so always make sure you ask questions and are comfortable with the answers and with what is going on throughout any treatment.



## Why Choose a Specialist

At some point in time, parents may find themselves having to make a decision about whether to take their child to a general dentist or a specialist. While a general dentist is fine for general issues, such as teeth cleanings and cavities, they may not be the best choice for all situations. Many children will need a specialist who has in-depth knowledge beyond the basics. This is especially true of those who may need to have their teeth straightened or their jaws aligned.

If your child has teeth that need to be straightened, a specialist is always the way to go. Children may need to see the orthodontist if their teeth are coming in too fast or too slowly, if they are spaced too far apart, or if they are too crowded or protruding. While some issues may bring the child physical discomfort, others may be leading to psychological discomfort.

According to the National Bullying Prevention Center, nearly a quarter of all students report being bullied during the school year, with 64 percent of them saying they never reported it to anyone. The reality of bullying in schools is that, according to reports, 55 percent of the

time students are being bullied because of their looks. If your child has a visible issue with their teeth being crooked or protruding, it could be leading to some troublesome times while at school, even if they are not opening up to share that information with parents, teachers, or counselors.

Having teeth straightened or jaws aligned is a serious issue that you don't want to trust to just anyone. By opting for a specialist you can rest assured knowing that your child is in good hands. The specialist is someone who has had the extensive education to help ensure there will be a successful treatment outcome. When your child gets braces, for example, it is a commitment that your family is making. The average length of time that braces are on a child's teeth will be two years, so you are committing to that period of time that you will be working with the doctor, as well as investing time and money. You want to make sure that you get the best possible outcome, so it's always better to avoid taking shortcuts or making compromises.

## Wanting What is Best

Parents want what is best for their children, including when it comes to getting them off to the best possible oral health start. By getting kids started at a young age, they can help them establish healthy habits that will last a lifetime. When people have a beautiful smile, whether as a child or an adult, they tend to feel better about themselves, have higher self esteem and more confidence, and are often more outgoing and ready to get involved in activities.

General dentists, pediatric dentists, and orthodontists each have their place within the dental field. They each bring unique skills and knowledge to the table that are offered to the community in order to help them

meet their needs. By evaluating what it is that your child needs, you can make the right decision about what type of doctor will be the best option. Always meet with the doctor and ask questions, so you can determine if the person is qualified for what your child needs done, and that you all feel comfortable with the doctor and their team.

One of the greatest feelings in the world for a parent is when your child begins to smile at you. That's a feeling you want to preserve and help them feel great about too. Parents lay the foundation for great oral health and a beautiful smile that will last a lifetime.

## SOURCES

National Bullying Prevention Center. "Bullying Statistics." <http://www.pacer.org/bullying/resources/stats.asp>



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