

ON THE JOB

Pediatric dentist tries to keep anxiety at bay

By **Cindy Atoji Keene** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 03, 2012



LISA POOLE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Dr. Amy Ala checked the teeth of 3-year-old Marissa Gaspar at her Beverly dental office while Marissa's mother, Jill, looked on.

Dr. Amy Ala remembers going to the dentist as a child all too well. Her dentist was surrounded by scary looking steel and chrome dental equipment, and when he started drilling, he wouldn't stop.

"I remember waving my hand during a filling, trying to tell him that it hurt, but he would just continue," said Ala, 40. "I was terrified."

But Ala, a pediatric dentist at DentaQuest Oral Health Center in Westborough and Generations Dental Center in Beverly, said visiting the dentist doesn't have to be a painful experience for children. She focuses on oral health, dental development, and managing anxiety — both children's and parents'.

“I swore I would never practice dentistry with that ‘the sit-down, open-your-mouth, and let's get this done’ approach,” said Ala.

It's not uncommon for you to see preschoolers with six or 10 cavities or more. Why are cavities becoming so common at such a young age?

Sugar is pervasive in food and snacks, including juice and sugary drinks. Cavities are also contagious, with cavity-causing bacteria passed from mom to child, if they share drinks or food.

How do you ease a child's fear?

I am honest with children but try to use language they can understand. Instead of words like drill, hurt, X-rays, or shot, I'll say, for example, “I'm using sleepy juice to make your lip go to sleep.” I'll do magic tricks with my instruments, like making water bubbles with the suction device or blowing up my exam gloves into balloon animals.

What's the most unusual case you've seen so far?

A 2-year-old girl had odontoma, or tooth-like substances stuck up her jaw. In a situation like this, I might refer a patient to a children's hospital for oral surgery.

Why did you decide to become a pediatric dentist?

I was a middle school teacher, and then started looking for a career that incorporated my interests in arts, medicine, and research. I realized dentistry had all these components. I really enjoy working with kids. They make me laugh and keep me on my toes.

What's your dental horror story?

Once I saw a child who was so uncooperative, he had been seen by 13 different dentists, none of whom were able to work with him. He was quite difficult to treat.

Your husband is a dentist. Do you talk shop at home?

Yes, he'll ask me for advice, or I'll bounce an issue off him for a second opinion. There's someone right here that I trust. It works well for us.

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