

Man Behind the Mask: A Male Pediatric Dentist's Quest for Childhood Confidence

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Abstract

Creating a positive and playful environment in pediatric dentistry is essential for fostering trust and easing young patients' anxieties. While female pediatric dentists in India are increasingly recognized for their nurturing approach, the smaller representation of male practitioners highlights an opportunity for growth. By adopting child-friendly techniques, such as playful communication, empathetic listening, and creative interactions, male pediatric dentists can effectively bridge the gap and break stereotypes. Embracing a "pookie" persona—a blend of professionalism and playfulness—allows male dentists to transform dental visits into enjoyable experiences, leaving lasting positive impressions on children. This review underscores the importance of combining technical expertise with emotional connection to ensure comprehensive pediatric dental care for male pediatric dentists.

Keywords: Pediatric dentistry, Child-friendly techniques, Playful environment, Trust, Anxiety (easing/reducing).

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INTRODUCTION

"A child's laughter is the purest melody," but within the world of pediatric dentistry, creating an environment where that laughter thrives amidst clinical care is both a skill and a heartfelt craft. The delicate task of caring for young patients' oral health involves more than technical expertise—it demands the ability to create an environment of trust, comfort, and even playfulness. Pediatric dentists often juggle the roles of healthcare providers, entertainers, and empathetic listeners. In India, the field of pediatric dentistry has seen a significant rise in the number of female practitioners compared to their male counterparts. This trend reflects the broader growth of women pursuing careers in healthcare, with pediatric dentistry being one of the specialties where they have shown notable representation. Female pediatric dentists often bring a nurturing and empathetic approach, which is particularly advantageous in managing young patients. This can make children feel more comfortable and less anxious during dental procedures, leading to better cooperation and overall patient experience.

On the other hand, the relatively smaller number of male pediatric dentists highlights the need for greater engagement and training in communication and behavioral strategies to create a similar level of comfort for young patients. While male dentists may not naturally lean into nurturing roles as often, adopting playful, empathetic, and child-friendly techniques can bridge this gap. For male pediatric dentists, breaking through stereotypes and stepping into a playful, approachable person—like a "pookie"—can be a key to unlocking positive experiences for their young patients.

Mastering smiles, trust, and tiny teeth requires more than a gentle hand; it calls for understanding a child's psychology and building genuine connections. As the saying goes, "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down," and in dentistry, a kind and engaging approach serves as the sweet remedy to calm a child's fears. From humorous distractions to soothing words, every interaction has the potential to transform dental anxiety into a confident smile.

This review article delves into the essential strategies, skills, and behavioural approaches male

pediatric dentists must cultivate to bridge the gap between fear and comfort in their young patients. We explore the role of playfulness as a tool for engagement, cultural and emotional sensitivity in communication, and how to establish a supportive rapport with both children and their caregivers. By weaving together clinical expertise and empathy, male pediatric dentists can redefine the patient experience, ensuring that the path to oral health is one of trust, ease, and maybe even a few giggles along the way.

The Dual Role of a Pediatric Dentist: Clinician and Comforter:

Pediatric dentists play a vital dual role as clinicians and comforters, ensuring both effective treatments and a positive experience for young patients. As skilled clinicians, they diagnose, treat, and prevent oral health issues using precision and expertise. Their role extends to educating parents on maintaining children's long-term oral health, fostering preventive care habits. Buldur B conducted a study to analyse the view of pediatric dental patients about dental students, general dentist and the pediatric dental specialists- they found that the view of the pediatric dental patients are same for all whomever they are treating their oral issues [1].

Equally important is their role as comforters, where they create a safe and welcoming environment to ease the fears and anxieties of young patients. Pediatric dentists use techniques such as storytelling, positive reinforcement, and empathy to build trust and confidence. By understanding child psychology and addressing their emotional needs, they help children feel secure and cooperative during treatments. By blending clinical excellence with a compassionate and child-friendly approach, pediatric dentists ensure not only healthier smiles but also a lasting positive attitude toward oral care that benefits children throughout their lives.

Male Pediatric Dentists: Breaking Stereotypes and Building Connections:

Male pediatric dentists are breaking stereotypes by combining clinical expertise with empathy to build meaningful connections with young patients. Historically, caregiving roles have been associated with women, leading to assumptions that male practitioners may lack the same nurturing qualities. However, studies and observations challenge this notion, highlighting the ability of male pediatric dentists to excel in creating trust and comfort.

For instance, the effective behavior management and communication skills are critical in pediatric dentistry, regardless of gender [1]. Male dentists who adopt playful and empathetic approaches can successfully address dental anxiety in children, fostering positive experiences. Additionally, studies on social representations in healthcare emphasize that breaking stereotypes requires demonstrating competence

and emotional intelligence. A study by Ducrot C *et al.*, explores the social representations and stereotypes associated with pediatric surgeons among medical students, residents, and physicians in France. It highlights that pediatric surgery is perceived as a meticulous and demanding specialty, yet remains neutral in its social representation, with limited interest among medical peers [2].

By embracing child-friendly techniques like storytelling, humor, and positive reinforcement, male pediatric dentists are proving that compassion transcends gender. Their efforts not only enhance patient comfort but also contribute to reshaping perceptions in the field of pediatric dentistry.

The Role of Playfulness in Managing Pediatric Dental Anxiety:

Playfulness is a cornerstone of a male pediatric dentist's approach to managing dental anxiety, as it creates a relaxed and engaging environment that reduces fear and discomfort. Through playful interactions, such as storytelling, games, or humor, he can effectively distract children from the stress of dental procedures, making the experience more approachable [3]. By establishing trust through these playful methods, a male pediatric dentist encourages cooperation and minimizes resistance during treatment. Additionally, incorporating colorful decorations, entertaining tools, or themed equipment helps align the clinic with a child's perspective, making it a more welcoming space. A book by Schaefer CE presents 58 essential play therapy techniques designed for child clinicians, drawing from multiple theoretical orientations which in turn emphasizes practical applications, detailing activities, materials, and variations, while providing historical context, therapeutic rationale, and empirical evidence for each technique [4]. This playful approach not only alleviates anxiety but also fosters positive associations with dental visits, supporting long-term oral health.

Understanding Child Psychology: Key to Building Trust:

Understanding child psychology is essential for a male pediatric dentist to build trust, particularly in settings that may cause apprehension, like dental clinics. By recognizing a child's developmental stage, emotions, and thought processes, a male pediatric dentist can adjust his communication style and approach to create a sense of safety and comfort. Empathy, paired with active listening, helps establish a strong connection, making the child feel understood and valued. Incorporating familiar elements, such as playful interactions or engaging stories, allows the dentist to make procedures feel less intimidating and more engaging [5]. Ultimately, a solid grasp of child psychology enables a male pediatric dentist to ease anxiety, build trust, and nurture a positive, long-lasting relationship with young patients [6].

Behavioral Strategies to Ease Pediatric Dental Fears:

Behavioral strategies are especially vital for a male pediatric dentist in easing pediatric dental fears and creating a calm, positive environment. Using techniques like positive reinforcement—such as offering praise or small rewards for cooperative behavior—helps foster trust and encourages compliance. A male pediatric dentist can also model desired behavior by involving a sibling or parent in the treatment process, showing children that the experience is safe and manageable. Gradual desensitization, where procedures are introduced step by step, allows young patients to adjust comfortably [7]. Clear, age-appropriate communication, paired with the "tell-show-do" approach, further alleviates fear by making the process relatable and less intimidating. By incorporating these tailored strategies, a male pediatric dentist can build trust and ensure a stress-free, positive experience for young patients [7].

Comparative Insights: Male vs. Female Pediatric Dentists in Patient Comfort:

Male and female pediatric dentists both bring unique strengths to patient comfort, influenced by individual personalities and communication styles rather than solely their gender. Female dentists may often be perceived as more nurturing due to societal stereotypes, which can make young patients feel reassured. They might leverage their empathetic approach to connect emotionally with children, helping ease fears. On the other hand, male dentists can also foster trust and comfort by adopting a calm, confident demeanor and engaging children with humor or playful interactions. It's essential to emphasize that patient comfort depends more on the dentist's ability to understand child psychology, use effective communication (both verbal and non-verbal), and create a welcoming environment rather than gender-specific traits. A skilled pediatric dentist—regardless of gender—who prioritizes compassion and connection is key to ensuring a positive experience for young patients.

Painting Smiles: Adding Color to Transform Pediatric Dental Care!

Traditionally, male pediatric dentists have favored neutral or classic attire like white coats or darker shades, reflecting a professional image. But kids love color, and when a dentist's outfit aligns with their bright, playful preferences, it can completely transform the dental experience. Jafarzadeh M conducted a clinical study to analyse whether the attire of dentists influences treatment acceptance among children aged 6–12 years. It reveals that while attire design does not significantly impact treatment acceptance, it plays a role in building a positive relationship with pediatric patients during their initial visits [8]. Imagine a dentist sporting cheerful hues, fun prints, or cartoon-inspired designs—it creates an instant connection and makes the visit feel less clinical and more exciting.

By embracing a child's color choices in their attire, male pediatric dentists step into the child's world, building trust and putting young patients at ease [9]. This vibrant touch doesn't just ease anxiety; it turns a routine check-up into a positive, memorable adventure. Ashokkan A *et al.*, conducted a study to check the preferences of dentally anxious children regarding dentist attire and gender. They found that children show a preference for female dentists and attire that is perceived as friendly and non-threatening [10]. It's not just about looking the part—it's about creating a space where kids feel safe, happy, and eager to return!

A study by Mistry D *et al.*, explores the attitudes of children and their parents towards dentists' attire. It finds that attire influences perceptions and comfort levels, with both groups showing preferences for attire that is professional yet approachable [11].

Lessons Learned: Stories from the Pediatric Dental Chair:

A male pediatric dentist should be aware of stories that resonate with the emotional and behavioral aspects of treating young patients, turning each experience into a valuable lesson. For instance, stories of overcoming initial patient fear and hesitation can highlight the importance of patience and creating a bond of trust, showing how playful approaches or calming techniques can transform anxiety into cooperation. Tales of children with unique cultural or personal preferences can teach the value of tailoring communication and treatment strategies to suit individual needs [12]. Experiences with particularly anxious or non-verbal children might underline the significance of non-verbal cues and empathetic gestures in building rapport.

Additionally, stories of how humor or colorful distractions helped shift a child's focus from the procedure to the fun can reinforce the impact of creativity in pediatric dentistry. Encounters with supportive parents who encouraged their child through treatment can also serve as reminders of the importance of involving families in the care process. Collectively, these lessons—rooted in real experiences—equip a male pediatric dentist to better address fears, boost patient comfort, and foster a lasting positive impression of dental care among young patients [13].

Pookie Pediatric Dentist: Crafting Smiles for a Lifetime:

A "pookie" pediatric male dentist—someone who brings an extra spark of playfulness, empathy, and creativity—has unique ways of turning a child's negative dental experience into a positive one, surpassing the approach of a more conventional dentist. His ability to infuse humor and personalized attention into every interaction helps break down a child's anxiety and fosters trust. For instance, he might use silly nicknames for tools, like calling the dental mirror a "tooth detective," to make the environment feel fun and unthreatening [14].

Additionally, a pookie dentist excels at reading non-verbal cues, quickly recognizing when a child is overwhelmed and adapting his approach with patience, distraction techniques, or playful storytelling. He might dress in vibrant, child-friendly colors or themed outfits, transforming himself into a superhero in the eyes of his young patients. By creating a world that feels safe and engaging, the pookie dentist not only alleviates fear but also replaces negative memories with a sense of accomplishment and excitement.

This personalized and playful approach encourages a lifelong positive association with dental care, leaving young patients eager to return—an impact that goes beyond just completing the treatment. It's about turning a challenging moment into a cherished memory.

Soft Words, Big Impact: The Gentle Tone of Male Pediatric Dentists:

Pediatric patients often form a deep emotional attachment to their mothers, finding comfort in the familiar softness of their tone and mannerisms. Recognizing this, a male pediatric dentist can adapt his approach by embracing a gentle and soothing voice when interacting with young patients. This creates an atmosphere of safety and reassurance, reflecting the nurturing qualities children are accustomed to. A soft tone helps in alleviating fear and anxiety, fostering trust and cooperation during dental procedures. By demonstrating empathy and patience through calm communication, the male dentist can bridge emotional gaps and ensure a positive experience, transforming the clinical environment into a space where children feel cared for and understood.

Fun Meets Function: Accessories That Transform Pediatric Dentistry into Playtime Magic:

A male pediatric dentist can use a variety of accessories to make himself more approachable and appealing to young patients, turning the dental visit into a fun and engaging experience. Some creative options include:

- **Themed Scrubs or Coats:** Wearing scrubs with playful patterns like cartoons, superheroes, or animal designs can instantly capture a child's attention.
- **Colorful Lanyards or Badges:** Fun, vibrant lanyards or ID badge holders featuring favorite characters or symbols can spark interest and conversation.
- **Whimsical Hats or Headbands:** A dentist could wear a headband with small antennae, a funny hat, or a cap featuring a child-friendly design to create a lighthearted atmosphere.
- **Decorative Face Masks:** Masks with cheerful prints or characters can appear less intimidating to young patients.
- **Comfortable Shoes with Fun Designs:** Sneakers featuring bright colors, patterns, or popular themes can subtly enhance the playful vibe.

- **Funny Glasses or Props:** Glasses with oversized frames, silly designs, or props like a bubble wand can add a touch of humor and ease nerves.
- **Interactive Accessories:** Items like light-up pens, colorful wristbands, or toy-like tools that "help" during the procedure can make the experience feel more like playtime.
- **Friendly Name Tag:** A name tag with a nickname like "Dr. Smiles" or "Superhero Dentist" can add a relatable and friendly touch.

These accessories not only lighten the mood but also help the dentist build rapport with children by stepping into their world of imagination and fun. This thoughtful effort can make dental visits something kids look forward to!

Words That Work: Unlocking Smiles with Pediatric Speech Techniques:

A male pediatric dentist can use tailored speech techniques to connect with young patients, ease their fears, and create a positive experience [15]. Here are some effective methods:

- **Age-Appropriate Language:** Simplify explanations using fun, relatable terms like "magic water" for anesthetic or "tickling toothbrush" for cleaning tools to make procedures less intimidating.
- **Storytelling:** Engage children with imaginative stories related to dental care, such as "rescuing sugar bugs" or "helping teeth stay strong like superheroes," to turn treatment into an adventure [15].
- **Soft, Gentle Tone:** Speak in a calm and soothing voice to convey reassurance and reduce anxiety.
- **Interactive Conversations:** Encourage children to talk about their favorite toys, shows, or hobbies, building a rapport and shifting focus away from the procedure.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Use encouraging words like "You're doing great!" or "Wow, you're so brave!" to boost confidence and cooperation.
- **Ask Questions:** Use fun and engaging questions—like "Can you open wide like a lion?"—to make instructions playful and less daunting.
- **Descriptive Humor:** Add a touch of humor, like calling tools by whimsical names or comparing the suction tube to a tiny vacuum cleaner that loves to snack on water.

By integrating these speech techniques, a male pediatric dentist can create a trusting and friendly environment, ensuring that children feel understood, supported, and excited about their dental visits. Sreesubin KS designed a story book in a sense of reducing the dental anxiety when the pediatric patients are made to read the interesting stories during their appointments and they surprising found that this use of story book reduced the patient's dental anxiety [15].

CONCLUSION

Male pediatric dentists play a crucial role in fostering positive experiences and promoting dental health among children. Their presence in the field highlights the importance of diverse representation in pediatric dentistry. Combining professional expertise with an empathetic approach, they build trust with young patients, often using creative and playful techniques to reduce fear and anxiety.

As role models, male pediatric dentists help break stereotypes by demonstrating that “Empathy and care are not bound by gender”. By balancing clinical skills with compassion, they not only address the unique dental needs of children but also create an environment where kids feel comfortable and valued. This commitment ensures better oral health outcomes and a strong foundation for lifelong dental care practices.

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