

Evaluation of the Perception and Attitude of Children toward their Dentist: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Children usually have a preoccupied impression about a doctor and a clinic, which is the most common cause of anxiety. Doctor's dress plays a major role in a child's perception. By understanding this, a suitable dress code could be adopted to establish good rapport with children.

Aim: The aim of the present study to evaluate the perception and attitude of children toward their dentist.

Materials and methods: The present study comprised 300 children aged 6 to 14 years visiting the Department of Pedodontics. The questionnaire included seven parts, all intended to assess a child's perception. They were also asked whether they had any medical faculty in their family and also about the attitude of the siblings toward dentists. Descriptive analysis has been done, and chi-square test was used to assess the difference between the variables; $p < 0.05$ was considered as statistically significant.

Results: Most of the children (90%) had visited dentists and majority (79.3%) of the children liked the dental treatment. But, only 3.3% of the children had a family physician. Approximately, 24% of the children reported that a sibling had a pleasant perception of their visit to a dentist. And, the children preferred to be treated by female dentist (81.7%), 77.6% of the children preferred their dentist to wear a colored coat instead of a white one. About 74.6% of the children preferred mask-wearing dentists. About 85% of the children preferred to be treated by a female dentist, but it was not statistically significant ($p > 0.061$).

Conclusion: This study concluded that knowing the child's perceptions play a key role in improving the practices. The study concluded that children have strong preferences regarding the appearance of their dentist.

Clinical significance: Fear of dentists and dental treatment has been considered a major hindrance to the deliver a quality dental services to children, so evaluating the perception of the children will be easy to convince them for the treatment.

Keywords: Children, Dental treatment, Pediatric dentistry, Perception, White coat.

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INTRODUCTION

For most of the children, visiting a dentist is no easy task. It can be a most anxious event that instead of consulting, they will only bear the agony associated with the dental problem. Fear of dentists and dental treatment has been considered a major hindrance to the delivery of quality dental services.¹

A child's fear about the dentist is regarding the treatment procedures. However, its etiology is not completely known, and it remains a major barrier to dental care.² According to the three-pathway theory of Rachman,³ children may develop an anxious response directly (by conditioning) or via more indirect learning (by modeling or from information). While factors influencing anxiety vary greatly, appropriate clothing of the dentist might possibly contribute to dentist's empathy.⁴ Barrett and Booth⁵ were the first to report a negative aspect of the traditional white coat attire, and observed that children regard formally dressed doctors as competent, but not friendly.

It is very difficult for a dentist to treat a child with their full cooperation. The technical procedures involved are not the only reason for noncooperation, but also to the children's different emotional upsets. The most common emotional upsets seen during dental treatment are anxiety and fear, which might originate from a previous traumatic experience in the dental office or during hospitalization for other reasons.⁶

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To deliver effective and efficient treatment, it is important for dentists to establish a friendly relationship with children. A strong rapport is vital in creating a comfortable atmosphere where the child does not feel taken. Children often make judgments about their dentist based on his or her appearance and often record and analyze their dentist's every word, movement, and gesture during a dental appointment.⁷ This study was designed to assess feelings and attitudes of children toward their dentists.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study comprised 300 children aged 6 to 14 years visiting the Department of Pedodontics, S.J.M Dental College and Hospital, Chitradurga, Karnataka, India. The study was conducted between March and May 2016. Ethical approval was obtained from institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained from all the parents/guardians.

Information was collected from the children using a questionnaire developed by AlSarheed.⁷ A questionnaire was given to children attending the department during study period. The questionnaire included seven parts all intended to assess a child's perception. They were also asked whether they had any medical faculty in their family and also about the attitude of the siblings toward dentists. Also, every child was asked to choose pictures that were preferable regarding dentist gender, attire, and equipment.

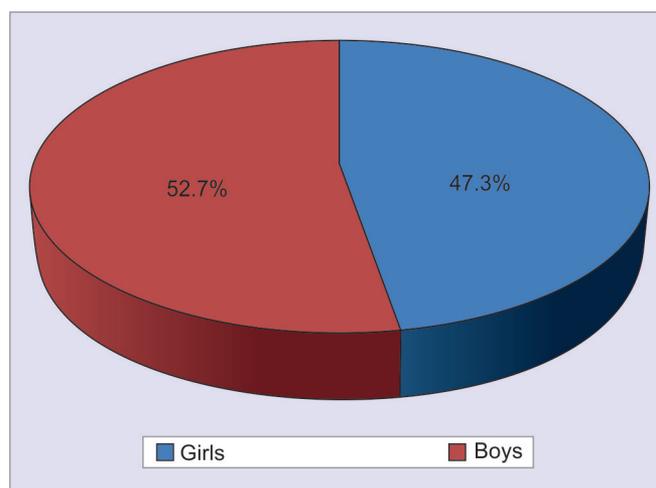
Statistical Analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 20 was used to analyze the data. Descriptive analysis has been done and chi-square test was used to assess the difference between the variables, and $p < 0.05$ was considered as statistically significant.

RESULTS

The present study comprised 300 children out of which are 142 (47.3) girls and 158 (52.7%) boys shown in Graph 1. Table 1 shows that most of the children (90%) had visited dentists and majority (79.3%) of the children liked the dental treatment. But, only 3.3% of the children had a family physician. Approximately 24% of the children reported that a sibling had a pleasant perception of their visit to a dentist.

Table 2 reveals that majority of the children preferred to be treated by female dentist (81.7) and 77.6% of the children preferred their dentist to wear a colored coat instead of a white one. About 74.6% of the children preferred mask-wearing dentists. Table 3 shows that 85% of the children preferred to be treated by a female dentist, but it was not statistically significant ($p > 0.061$).



Graph 1: Distribution of gender

Table 1: Summary of the responses of the children to their previous dental experience

Questions	Response	Number (%)
Have you been to a dentist before?	Yes	270 (90)
	No	30 (10)
How did you feel during dental treatment?	Liked it	238 (79.3)
	Did not like it	62 (20.7)
Is there a physician in your family?	Yes	10 (3.3)
	No	290 (96.7)
How did your sibling feel when he/she visited a dentist?	Liked it	72 (24)
	Did not like it	228 (76)

Table 2: Summary of the perceptions of children of their dentists

Questions	Response	Number (%)
Do you prefer to be treated by a male or female dentist?	Male	55 (18.3)
	Female	245 (81.7)
Which outfit do you prefer?	Colored coat	233 (77.6)
	White coat	67 (22.4)
Which dentist do you prefer?	No dental protection	46 (15.4)
	Protective glasses	7 (2.4)
	Mask	224 (74.6)
	Mask and protective glasses	23 (7.6)

Table 3: Perception of dentists' gender according to the gender of the children

Preferred dentist	Girls [n (%)]	Boys [n (%)]	p-value
Female	126 (88.7)	129 (81.6)	0.061 NS
Male	16 (11.3)	29 (18.4)	

NS: Nonsignificant

DISCUSSION

Bright lights and unpleasant noise from the equipment can be a terrifying experience for children. A pediatric dental office should be designed to make children comfortable when they wait for their dentist.

Earliest judgment of a dentist is made by the children based on his or her appearance, and often they record and analyze their every word, movement, and gesture during a dental appointment.⁸ A positive vibe is formed from the attire of the dentist, which is important in gaining confidence of the children. Psychologists/sociologists highlight the importance of appearance and its effect upon first impressions and interpersonal relationship.⁹

This study implied that children have strong perceptions and preferences regarding dental visits and dentists. The majority (79.3%) of the children in this study reported that they liked their visit to the dentist, which is consistent with the results of other studies that have examined children's attitudes toward dental care.^{10,11} About 20.7% of children disliked their visit, which is of great concern to the dentists.

About 77.6% of the children in the current study preferred their dentist to wear a colored coat instead of a white one. This result is similar to that of AlSarheed,⁷ indicating that children prefer their dentist to wear the traditional formal attire with a white coat, as they see it as a symbol of healing. This finding supports the report by McCarthy et al.¹²

The reason for knowing children's attitudes toward their dentists is to provide positive changes so that dentist visit is no longer a pain. Children, in this study, revealed that they would prefer same gender dentist to treat. This might improve the general comfort level of children in the dentist's office.

Mistry and Tahmassebi¹³ reported a significant difference in the preference of the participants for the gender of their dental health care provider: Male participants favored male students and females preferred female students. Regardless of the child's gender, 85% of the children preferred a female dentist for treatment.

Proper dress and the use of protective clothing protect both patients and health care providers from infectious diseases. About 74.6% of the children in our study preferred that dentists wear masks. Similarly, Shulmam and Brehm¹⁴ reported that 70% preferred that dentists wore a mask during dental treatment.

CONCLUSION

The present study concluded that the new insight about children's perception of dentists, their attire, providing

comfortable environment, and the delivery of dental care must be implemented in order to improve dental care. The study concluded that children have strong preferences regarding the appearance of their dentist and regarding the fear of dental visits. All members of the dental profession must be aware of patient perceptions, preferences, and fears to help to meet patient needs and provide quality care in a manner, i.e., comforting and reduces anxiety.

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