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When Do You Need a Dentist vs. a Specialist?



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When Do You Need a 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.

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.

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.

MEET DR. BALAKRISHNAN



Dr. Meenakshi Balakrishnan is the founder and owner of Downers Grove Orthodontics in Downers Grove, Illinois.

Dr. Balakrishnan completed her dental degree at the University of Pennsylvania, where she graduated at the top of her class with a perfect GPA. She then completed her residency training in Orthodontics as well as a Masters in Oral Science at the University of Illinois-Chicago in 2006.

In addition to managing her busy private practice, Dr. Balakrishnan is an active teacher. She educates Dental students at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and hosts classes and courses on breathing techniques, meditation, and healthy living in suburban Chicago throughout

the year. She is also an active volunteer for the Art of Living Foundation and supports local sports teams, schools as well as several charities.

Dr. Balakrishnan and her husband, Dr. Balu Natarajan, reside in Hinsdale Illinois with their sons Atman and Advait. In her spare-time she enjoys yoga and meditation, biking, running, cooking and cake decorating.

Dr. Balakrishnan continues to study the latest advances in her specialty through memberships in the following professional organizations:

- American Association of Orthodontists
- Illinois Society of Orthodontists
- Midwestern Society of Orthodontists

Dr. Balakrishnan is the author of several scientific articles in orthodontics. She is also the author of a book titled **“Grin and Wear It : The In-depth Guide to your Child’s Orthodontic Care”**.