

suburban life



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CHILD'S PLAY

by ERICA YOUNG
photos by JODY ROBINSON

With Dr. Rachel Maher at the helm, **Wilmington's Dentistry for Children** helps young patients establish good dental habits and create healthy smiles that last a lifetime.

How do I know when my child is ready for the dentist? How can my child have a dental experience that won't frighten or intimidate them? Why is my child struggling with tooth decay at such a young age?

Those are the kinds of questions that Rachel A. Maher, D.M.D., answers every day, as one of the foremost pediatric dental specialists in Wilmington, Delaware.

Dr. Maher is the founder of Dentistry for Children, a full-service pediatric dental practice that provides pediatric treatments such as cleanings, fillings, and extractions. Dr. Maher and her staff also specialize in caring for children who have special needs, working individually with patients to provide the best treatment, for patients from infancy into their teen years.

June 2023 marks the 20-year anniversary of Dentistry for Children's entrance into the Wilmington community. In that time, Dr. Maher has played a key role in helping the children in her community establish healthy dental habits—and prevent bad ones from taking root—at a young age.

"Many times our kids will come here already afraid," she says. "They only have medical experience with a pediatrician and associate us with needles or shots, which turns into a phobia. Pediatric dentistry is our opportunity to break that too-common phobia before adulthood."

She does so with a patient-centered technique she refers to as "Tell, Show, Do."

"We talk to our patients first about what will happen during their visit, then we show them the instruments, often demonstrating them first on their finger, before using it on their teeth," she adds. "That helps us break their phobia; by showing them how ticklish a toothbrush is, or tapping their finger with the tooth counter, which can *look* a little scary, to show them it doesn't hurt."

"Our office is staffed by fabulous ladies who help me with everything from appointments to patient care," she continues. "We also have hygienists and dental assistants who have been with me for years. Each person on our team does a great job, whether it's talking to parents to help them understand what we're doing, or focusing on keeping patients comfortable."

Dentistry for Children focuses on prevention and education by talking directly to kids and their parents or caregivers. Much of the conversation revolves around the cause and prevention of cavities, though it may also venture into a discussion of chronic conditions such as asthma, different medications, family history of tooth decay, sugar in the diet, and lack of brushing and flossing, all of which can contribute to tooth decay.

"Cavity bacteria can be transferred by the parent or the primary caregiver, whether it's by sharing utensils or sharing a meal,"



she adds. “Bacteria feeds off sugars from food, and that’s why we focus on prevention and education with parents and caregivers. We also talk a lot about brushing and flossing, including flossing tools and techniques. No one really thinks to floss baby teeth, but it can be a great way to help combat early issues.

“We also find that early childhood cavities can come from breastfeeding at night or sending a baby to bed with a bottle,” she continues. “Usually about 60 to 70 percent of the time bacteria are transmitted from mom or the primary caregiver, but we are also seeing that bacteria can be spread from classmates at daycare, when children put toys in their mouths and then share the toys. Cavities can begin any time after the teeth come in, starting at six months to one year old.”

As for when parents should begin taking their children in for a first visit, Dr. Maher suggests following guidance from the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry: within six months of the eruption of a first tooth, and no later than their first birthday. She adds, “At that age we’ll do a gentle lap exam, count the baby’s teeth, brush their teeth, and apply fluoride treatment, if the parent wants it.”

While regular visits aren’t necessary for most babies, Dr. Maher works with parents to foster healthy at-home dental techniques for their little ones.

“As soon as a tooth shows up, you want to start brushing,” she says. “There are wipes and products that have xylitol in them, which is an inactive sugar that prevents bacteria from adhering to the

teeth. We can make recommendations to parents who are curious about prevention from a young age.”

Dr. Maher’s passion for her work seems to be contagious. In May, two of her former patients graduated from dental school, one is currently in dental school, and another is going to dental hygiene school. Additionally, four other former patients have expressed their plans to follow a path to dental school.

“I have several more [former patients] in college, or just graduated, who are interested in someday going to dental school,” she adds. “Out of those, three started off observing and then assisting and working in my office. They learn as much as they can by experience, which helps very much when they are applying and are accepted to professional schools.”

Her close bond with patients has been foundational to the practice for its first 20 years, and Dr. Maher says it will remain so for years to come.

“We love interacting with the parents, and we get to see kids from soon after they’re born until they’re 16 or 17 years old,” she says. “It’s so exciting to watch kids grow. Our team loves to do what we do, and the kids have fun because of it.” ■

→ **Dentistry for Children**
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About Dr. Rachel Maher

Dr. Maher earned her dental doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine in Philadelphia, and completed a general dental residency program at Christiana Care Health Services in Wilmington. She then pursued advanced studies in pediatric dentistry at Children’s Hospital Medical Center in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dr. Maher is a board-certified diplomate of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) and the founding doctor behind the Delaware chapter of the AAPD. She is also a past president for the Delaware State Dental Society. In addition to having been named a “Top Dentist” in Delaware since 2007, she recently was named one of “America’s Most Honored Dentists” by The American Registry.

Dr. Maher is active in her community, and has volunteered in support of numerous programs to better the community. She is also a lifelong learner who attends continuing-education courses each year to pursue in-depth information about the latest advances in her field.