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Children's Perception of Their Dentists.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to assess children's attitudes and perceptions toward their dentist. A questionnaire was designed to evaluate children's attitudes and preferences toward dentists. Hundred children within age range of 9–12 years took part in the survey. 87% of the children who completed the questionnaire reported that they had been to the dentist before. Of the children who had visited the dentist, approximately 66% reported liking their visit, 11% didn't like their visit, and 18% were afraid. 72% of the children preferred their dentist wear colour dress instead of a white coat. When asked to choose between two pictures of different clinical settings, 83% of the children indicated that they preferred a decorated dental clinic over a plain clinic. Fear of local anesthetic injection, tooth drilling and extractions were the most common reasons cited for not liking dental treatment. Children have strong perceptions and preferences regarding their dentists. Data collected for this study can be used by dentists to improve delivery of care.

Keywords: Dental care, Perception, Attitudes, Questionnaire, Dentists, Children

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INTRODUCTION

For most adults and children, an appointment with the dentist can be a terrifying experience that they will not subject themselves to, unless experiencing unbearable pain. It is therefore necessary for the dentists to establish a friendly relationship with patients, especially children, from the very first dental visit in order to combat patient fears and deliver effective treatment. Studies indicate that 5% and 6% of the population and 16% of school going children have a fear of dentists, thus causing hindrance in patient care. [1,2]

A child often makes judgments about the dentist based on his or her appearance and often records and analyze their dentist's every word, movement and gesture during a dental appointment. (1,3) Establishing a friendly relationship with the dentist can alleviate common fears such as the sight of the anesthetic needle and the sight, sound, and sensation of the dental hand-piece and bur which have been shown to provoke anxiety. [3] Children who have positive interactions with their dentist will be less likely to develop a fear of dentists and will experience less anxiety during dentist appointments. As a result, they will be more likely to visit the dentist as adults and will have better dental health.

Very few studies have been done to document the perceptions of children regarding their dentist. This information is important as it can help dentists mould their practices to meet the needs of their patients.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study group consisted of 100 patients, aged 9-12 years visiting Saveetha dental hospital, Chennai. A questionnaire consisting of 7 items was used to assess children's perceptions of their dentist.

Subjects were asked if they had been to the dentist before and if there were any physicians in the family, and if they prefer to be treated by a male or female dentist. Also, each child was asked to choose between pictures to indicate their preference regarding the dentist's attire, and preferences regarding the design of the dental clinic. The responses were recorded, analyzed and statistics done.

RESULTS

Eighty seven percent of children in this study had been to the dentist. The children's responses to their previous dental experience are summarized below.

The majority of the children (66%) reported they liked their visit to the dentist, while only 11% claimed they did not like their visit. Additionally, 18% reported that they were afraid when they visited the dentist, while only 5% reported that they did not know how they felt about their visit. Children's perception concerning their visit to the dentist depended significantly on their gender type, as girls liked their visit to dentist more than the boys. The perceptions of children who had a physician in the family were significantly different from children who did not. Eighteen percent of children who had a physician in the family did not like their dental visit.

Approximately 58% of the children preferred to be treated by a male dentist. Further analysis revealed that preference regarding the dentist's gender was dependent on the gender of the child. Boys strongly preferred to be treated by a male dentist while girls preferred to be treated by a female dentist.

72% of children preferred that their dentist not wear a white coat. When the children were asked to choose between pictures of an undecorated dental clinic and a decorated dental clinic as the clinic they would like to be treated in, 83% selected the decorated dental clinic.

Children cited several causes of fear related to visits to the dentist's office. These fears were related to injection (76%), tooth extraction (31%), teeth drilling (31%), and sight of dental instruments (12%).

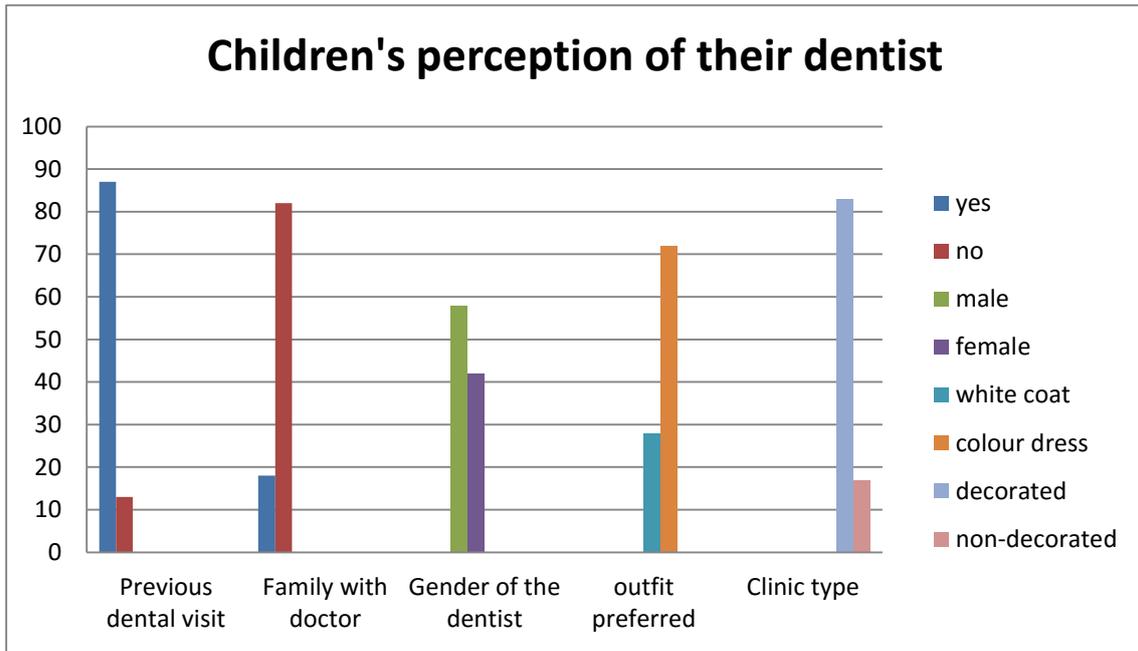


Figure 1.1

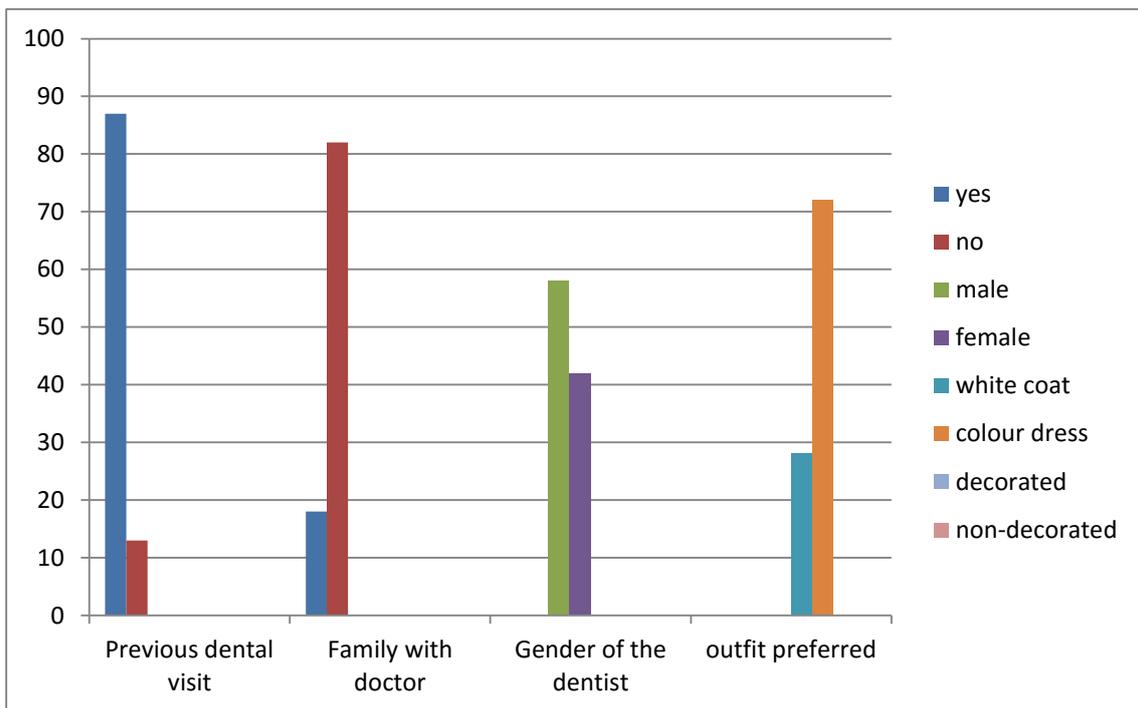


Figure 1.2

| QUESTION ASKED | RESPONSE | PERCENTAGE |
|--|----------------------|------------|
| Have you visited the dentist before? | Yes | 87% |
| | No | 13% |
| Is there a doctor or physician in your family? | Yes | 18% |
| | No | 82% |
| How do you feel during a dental visit? | Like it | 66% |
| | Don't like it | 11% |
| | Afraid | 18% |
| | Don't know | 5% |
| Do you prefer to be treated by a male or a female dentist? | Male | 58% |
| | Female | 42% |
| Which outfit do you prefer? | Colour dress | 72% |
| | White coat | 28% |
| Do you prefer a decorated or a non-decorated clinic? | Decorated | 83% |
| | Non-decorated | 17% |
| What makes you scared during a dental visit? | Injection | 76% |
| | Extraction | 31% |
| | Teeth drilling | 31% |
| | Sight of instruments | 12% |

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that children have strong perceptions and preferences regarding dental visits and dentists. The majority (66%) of the children in this study reported that they liked their visit to the dentist which is consistent with the results of other such studies. [1, 4, 5] However, it is of concern that 11% of children in this study reported that they disliked their visit and another 18% reported that they were afraid of the dentist.

The purpose of identifying children's attitudes towards their dentists is to effect positive changes or adjustments that would make children more comfortable in the dental setting and improve the quality of dental visits. Children in this study indicated that they would prefer to be treated by a dentist of the same gender. Assigning children to dentists of the same gender may improve the general comfort level of children in the dentist's office.

Children in this study prefer that their dentist not wear a white coat (72%) which is consistent with other studies which found that patients were less favorable towards the white coat. [6, 7]

It is noted that children favored a decorated dental clinic design over a routine and bare clinic. The finding is in agreement with other studies where the majority of the children favored the decorated clinic over a plain clinic. [1, 8] This finding may be attributed to the comfort a decorated clinic generates in their minds while they are receiving dental treatment.

In order to make positive changes and adjustments that would make a dental visit more attractive, it is important to understand what children see as unpleasant aspects about going to the dentists. The children cited injection, tooth extraction and tooth drilling as common fears which are shown to be consistent with other studies. [1, 3, 5] These findings emphasize the need to use only the necessary instruments during treatment and the use of tell-show-do technique systemically during treatment.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study present new insight about children's perception of dentists and the delivery of dental care and should be used by dentists to improve their practices. The study identified that children have strong preferences regarding the appearance of their dentist and dental clinics and have identifiable fears associated with dental visits. Dentists should make these relevant changes in addition to improving chair side manner and clinical competence in order to provide optimal care for patients.



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