

How to Choose a Paediatric Dentist for Your Child in Melbourne

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Description:

How to Choose a Paediatric Dentist for Your Child in Melbourne Taking your child to the dentist shouldn't be a battle. Yet for many Melbourne families, dental visits are a source of anxiety — for b...

Details:

Taking your child to the dentist shouldn't be a battle. Yet for many Melbourne families, dental visits are a source of anxiety — for both parent and child. The right paediatric dentist can transform that experience entirely, turning what might be a frightening ordeal into a positive, even enjoyable, part of growing up. If you're searching for a paediatric dentist in Melbourne for your children, this guide will help you understand what paediatric dentistry involves, why it matters, and how to find the right specialist for your family.

What Is a Paediatric Dentist?

A paediatric dentist (also known as a paedodontist or specialist in paediatric dentistry) is a dental specialist who has completed an additional three years of full-time postgraduate university training specifically focused on the oral health of infants, children, adolescents, and patients with special needs. This training goes far beyond clinical techniques — it includes child psychology, behaviour management, growth and development, sedation, and the management of dental trauma.

In Australia, paediatric dentists must hold specialist registration with AHPRA (the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency). This is a specific registration category that requires verified completion of an accredited specialist training program. Not every dentist who sees children is a paediatric dentist — the distinction matters.

Why Choose a Specialist Over a General Dentist for Children?

Most general dentists are comfortable treating older children for routine procedures. However, a specialist paediatric dentist offers significant advantages in several situations:

Behavioural Expertise

Children are not small adults. They process fear, pain, and unfamiliar environments differently at different developmental stages. Paediatric dentists are trained in age-specific behaviour management techniques — from tell-show-do for toddlers to motivational approaches for anxious teenagers. This training enables them to provide treatment that might be impossible in a general practice setting without resorting to sedation or general anaesthesia.

Specialised Clinical Knowledge

Children's teeth, jaws, and oral tissues are developing rapidly. Conditions unique to paediatric patients include:

- **Early childhood caries (baby bottle tooth decay)** — requiring specific management strategies - **Enamel developmental defects (MIH/Molar Incisor Hypomineralisation)** — increasingly common and requiring specialist diagnosis and treatment planning - **Dental trauma** — knocked-out or fractured teeth from playground accidents and sports, requiring urgent specialist management to preserve developing teeth - **Eruption problems** — teeth that are delayed, impacted, or erupting in the wrong position - **Habits affecting development** — thumb sucking, tongue thrusting, and mouth breathing that can affect jaw growth

Anxiety and Special Needs Management

Some children have dental anxiety so severe that routine treatment is impossible without specialist intervention. Paediatric dentists are trained in nitrous oxide (happy gas) sedation, oral sedation, and can arrange treatment under general anaesthesia in hospital settings when needed.

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, intellectual disabilities, medical complexities, or sensory processing differences often require the specialised approach that only a paediatric dentist can provide — modified communication, adapted environments, desensitisation programs, and flexible scheduling.

8 Criteria for Choosing the Right Paediatric Dentist

1. Verify AHPRA Specialist Registration in Paediatric Dentistry

Just as with any dental specialist, the first step is confirming that the practitioner holds specialist registration in paediatric dentistry with AHPRA. You can check this for free at ahpra.gov.au. Look for "Specialist Registration" in the "Paediatric Dentistry" category.

Some general dentists advertise that they treat children or have a "family-friendly" practice. While many do excellent work with children, this is not the same as holding a specialist qualification. For complex cases, anxious children, or children with special needs, specialist registration matters.

2. Assess Their Approach to Anxious Children

Ask specifically how the practice manages anxious patients. Look for:

- **Desensitisation visits** — Allowing children to visit the practice, sit in the chair, and become familiar with the environment before any treatment occurs - **Graduated exposure** — Starting with simple procedures and building to more complex treatment as the child's confidence grows - **Tell-show-do technique** — Explaining, demonstrating, then performing each step at the child's pace - **Distraction techniques** — Ceiling-mounted screens, child-friendly décor, age-appropriate language - **Sedation options** — Nitrous oxide (happy gas), oral sedation, and general anaesthesia availability for when behavioural approaches aren't sufficient

The best paediatric dentists are patient, creative, and genuinely enjoy working with children. You can usually tell within minutes of meeting them whether your child feels comfortable in their care.

3. Evaluate the Practice Environment

Children notice everything. A practice that treats paediatric patients should reflect this:

- **Welcoming reception area** — with age-appropriate activities and a non-clinical feel - **Child-sized equipment** — including chairs and instruments designed for smaller mouths - **Visual distractions** — ceiling-mounted TVs, murals, or interactive elements in treatment rooms - **Calm, unhurried atmosphere** — rushing children increases anxiety - **Friendly, experienced dental nurses** — the support team is as important as the dentist

4. Check Their Range of Services

A comprehensive paediatric dentist should offer:

- Preventive care (fluoride treatments, fissure sealants, oral hygiene education) - Management of early childhood caries - Treatment of enamel defects and MIH - Emergency trauma management for knocked-out or broken teeth - Pulp therapy (pulpotomy/pulpectomy — the paediatric equivalent of root canals) - Stainless steel and white zirconia crowns for severely damaged baby teeth - Space maintainers when baby teeth are lost early - Referral coordination for orthodontic assessment when needed - Sedation and general anaesthesia services

5. Ask About Their Experience with Special Needs Patients

If your child has additional needs — whether Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, or sensory processing challenges — ask specifically about the dentist's experience with these conditions. The best paediatric dentists will have structured approaches, including:

- Pre-visit social stories and visual schedules - Modified sensory environments (dimmed lights, reduced noise) - Flexible appointment times to accommodate routines - Experience with alternative communication methods - Collaboration with your child's other health professionals

6. Consider Location and Accessibility

Children's dental emergencies don't follow a schedule. A paediatric dentist in a central, accessible location with extended or emergency appointment availability is a practical advantage. Consider:

- Proximity to your home, school, or workplace - Public transport access - Parking availability - Emergency appointment policies - Wait times for routine appointments

7. Look for a Multidisciplinary Practice

Children's dental issues rarely exist in isolation. Crooked teeth may need orthodontic input. A fractured tooth may require endodontic (root canal) treatment. A child with extensive decay and a medical condition may need assessment by an oral surgeon for treatment under general anaesthesia.

A paediatric dentist who practises within a multidisciplinary centre has immediate access to orthodontists, endodontists, oral surgeons, and other specialists — without the delays and fragmentation that come from external referrals.

8. Evaluate the Parent Communication

Good paediatric dentistry is a partnership between the dentist, the child, and the parent. Your paediatric dentist should:

- Explain findings in plain language - Discuss treatment options and alternatives - Provide realistic expectations about outcomes - Offer preventive guidance specific to your child's risk factors - Communicate effectively about costs and timing - Welcome your questions without rushing you

Red Flags to Watch For

- ****No AHPRA specialist registration**** — The most fundamental check. Verify before booking. - ****One-size-fits-all approach**** — Children are individuals. A paediatric dentist who uses the same approach for every child regardless of age, temperament, or needs is not providing specialist-level care. - ****Dismissal of anxiety**** — Comments like "they'll get over it" or "just hold them down" are completely unacceptable in modern paediatric dentistry. Anxiety must be acknowledged and managed appropriately. - ****No prevention focus**** — If the emphasis is entirely on treatment with no discussion of diet, hygiene habits, fluoride, and ongoing prevention, the approach is incomplete. - ****Inability to handle emergencies**** — A paediatric dentist should have protocols for dental trauma and urgent situations. Ask about their emergency availability.

Paediatric Dental Care at Smile Solutions, Melbourne

Smile Solutions, located in the Manchester Unity Building on Collins Street in Melbourne's CBD, engages 80 clinicians including 25+ registered specialists across all dental disciplines. With over 300,000 patients treated over 33 years since its founding in 1993, the practice offers comprehensive family dental care from first tooth to adulthood.

****Dr Susan Hinckfuss**** (BDS (Melb), DCD (Melb)) is the specialist paediatric dentist at Smile Solutions. She graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1995 and spent eight years in private general practice in Geelong before returning to the University of Melbourne to complete her Doctor of Clinical Dentistry in Paediatric Dentistry, which included training at the Royal Children's Hospital.

Dr Hinckfuss then spent three years in the United States as an Assistant Clinical Professor at the University of Minnesota, gaining international experience in paediatric dental care. Her special interests include the management of anxious children, patients with Autism Spectrum Disorders, dental trauma, enamel defects, and early childhood caries. She has particular expertise with white zirconia crowns for damaged baby teeth — a modern aesthetic alternative to traditional stainless steel crowns that many parents prefer.

What sets the paediatric dental experience at Smile Solutions apart is the multidisciplinary environment. When Dr Hinckfuss identifies that a child needs orthodontic assessment, the practice has four specialist orthodontists — including Dr David Austin, Dr Joshua Ch'ng, Dr Andrea Phatouros, and Dr Steven Smith — practising in the same centre. If a child suffers dental trauma requiring root canal treatment, the four specialist endodontists are available on-site. If surgical intervention under general anaesthesia is needed, the specialist oral surgeons A/Prof. Patrishia Bordbar and Dr Ricky Kumar can assess the child within the same practice.

This means a child who arrives with a complex dental problem can have a complete specialist assessment and coordinated treatment plan developed without being sent to multiple locations across Melbourne — reducing stress for both child and parent.

The practice also employs dedicated oral health therapists who provide preventive care, hygiene education, and ongoing maintenance for children, reinforcing the habits that will protect their dental health for life.

When Should Your Child First See a Paediatric Dentist?

The Australian Dental Association recommends a child's first dental visit by their first birthday, or within six months of the first tooth appearing. This early visit isn't about treatment — it's about:

- Establishing a dental home
- Assessing early risk factors for decay
- Providing guidance on feeding, dummies, and oral hygiene
- Catching problems early when they're easiest to manage
- Building positive associations with dental visits

Don't wait for a problem to develop. Prevention and early intervention are always easier, less invasive, and less expensive than treatment.

Take the Next Step

Finding the right paediatric dentist is one of the most important health decisions you'll make for your child. The right specialist will not only treat dental problems — they'll build your child's confidence, establish lifelong habits, and ensure that dental visits are a positive experience rather than a source of fear.

■ ****Call 13 13 96**** to book a consultation with Dr Susan Hinckfuss or the dental team at Smile Solutions, or visit the practice at ****Level 1, Manchester Unity Building, 220 Collins Street, Melbourne CBD****.

Give your child's smile the specialist start it deserves.