Kids' oral health? It's pure monkey business!

Gaby Bissett looks at how one woman’s wish is to make children’s experience in the dentist’s chair – and other health care situations – a happier one

Nearly half of all eight year olds have visible signs of decay on their teeth. One in seven children are classed as having severe or extensive tooth decay. And nearly 26,000 children aged five to nine were admitted to hospital in England in 2013-2014 with tooth decay. It is startling facts like these that prompted Helen Sadler to take on children’s oral hygiene as her next venture. The primary school teacher-turned-writer is well known for her inspirational and educational storybooks that help youngsters prepare for daunting experiences they may encounter in their childhood. Helen’s booming business blossomed when her daughter Josephine was a toddler. Before she was born, doctors detected something was wrong.

‘When I went for my 20 week scan the lady doing the ultra-sound said “oh” – there’s something but I don’t know what it is,’ said Helen. ‘We waited for a week or two. It was something called CCAM. It was a lump in the bottom of one of her lungs. It was monitored to see if it was growing.’

She had to have surgeons at the birth, just in case Josephine’s lungs didn’t open – but fortunately they did. When the time was right, a date was set for an operation. And this is when the idea struck.

Helen went about creating a book – with a monkey as the key character – that would guide her daughter through the hospital procedure and make the whole experience seem a lot more familiar and a lot less scary. It prepared her for everything from the operation procedure to the names of each piece of equipment. It was the reaction from the nurses that encouraged her to take it further. ‘They said “oh my word, she is the most well-prepared child”. They asked if I could share it with other people,’ she said.

Challenges

And so that is how it began. Her husband, Daniel, walked 100 miles with a friend to raise money for 10,000 copies to be printed – and the children and families loved them. She has already seen unimaginable successes from her previous titles – Kath Evans, now Head of Patient Experience for children, young people, maternity and neonates at NHS England, asked Helen to write a lesson plan for primary school children based on the secondary school plan while she was at the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement. This lesson plan introduced primary school children to the NHS, supported by a grant from the ACCN. The plan made up a resource pack that was sent to over 19,000 schools across the UK. It was evaluated by Liverpool John Moore’s University and subsequently all resources are now available as free downloads as well as being created into digital badges by Make.waves and NHS England. Six years down the line, her ‘Monkey’ series has exploded – from having a blood test to going to school, the series helps children facing all types of challenges.

Helen’s latest book, Monkey’s Family Visits The Dentist, is aimed at improving oral hygiene among young children. ‘I chose the dentist because obviously everyone has teeth and it has the highest rate of children having NHS anaesthetic,’ said Helen.

‘I think a lot of parents don’t realise that we’re supposed to go to the dentist from six months – I don’t think that’s been drilled in. I don’t think they know that you should be brushing kids teeth something like up to the age of 11. And I think children are not aware.’
Cheerful

The book follows the journey of Monkey and his sister who are set to have a check-up with their family dentist. Helen writes about what to expect, as well as detailing the job of each piece of equipment. Word searches, puzzles, stickers and a cheerful Monkey hand puppet help to ease children into the dentist environment, helping them understand the process from day one – and eliminating the chances of them developing the irrational fear that we often see develop in later life.

And she has high hopes for the book. Helen hopes by educating children about the dentist from a young age, it will prevent the ever-increasing problem of tooth decay. Last year, a report by the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) found that the most common reason five- to nine-year-olds were admitted to hospital was tooth decay – something that is often entirely preventable. Helen’s creation not only shows kids why going to the dentist is important, it also hits it home for parents who often do not realise just how important oral hygiene is.

Her daughter Josephine, now eight, said she thinks her mum’s books are fantastic. ‘Some children don’t really like blood tests and Monkey Has a Blood Test makes you feel more confident because Monkey has gone through it,’ she said. By getting these dentistry resource packs out to kids throughout the country, we might just start to see changes in oral hygiene and beyond. Helen said 73 books have been requested, such as Monkey Goes to the Opticians. The list is endless – as are the changes they can bring – and Helen’s not stopping.

References

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-33498324

But what do the children think?

Sam is three and his brother, Lucas, is two. Both were taken to the dentist at six months but mum, Louise, was keen for them not to forget the ‘strange’ experience of having a dentist and his dental nurse looking inside their mouths. She sat and played with the Monkey resources with the boys, who loved the stickers and the Monkey puppet and were keen, with help, to fill out the chart. Louise said: ‘The boys really enjoyed their afternoon with the book and am hoping it will make a trip to the dentist a less strange experience next time we go.’

For more information, visit www.monkeywellbeing.com or email helen@monkeywellbeing.com. You can follow on Twitter @monkeywellbeing or visit Monkey’s You Tube Channel at https://www.youtube.com/user/MonkeysMission. The story book is available from the Oral Health Foundation here – https://www.educatingsmiles.org/monkey-family-visit-the-dentist-storybook?keyword=monkey