

Is your child afraid of the dentist? CBT could help

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A pioneering study led by the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Teaching Hospitals will investigate whether Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) could help reduce the worryingly high number of children who are afraid of the dentist.

Around one in three children are scared of going to the [dentist](#), leading to dental avoidance, and end up with poor oral health, more toothache, dental infections and tooth decay as a result.

Now, a team of dentists and researchers led by the University of Sheffield's School of Clinical Dentistry have been awarded more than £1.6 million from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) to investigate a new way of reducing [dental anxiety](#) based on CBT.

The study, which will involve 600 children from 30 dental practices and clinics across England and Wales will examine whether specially developed, child friendly resources for children, parents and dental professionals will help children complete their dental treatment at their family practice rather than being sent to hospital for specialist services

for sedation or general anaesthetic.

Principal Investigator, Professor Zoe Marshman from the University of Sheffield's School of Clinical Dentistry and Honorary Consultant in Dental Public Health at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Foundation Trust, said:

"Dental anxiety is very common in children, and can lead to [poor oral health](#), more tooth decay and extractions.

"Traditionally, children with dental anxiety have been referred by high street dentists to specialist services for sedation or general anaesthetic. This approach does nothing to stop their fear, and they may go on to spend a lifetime avoiding the dentist. A simple and cost-effective way of helping dentally anxious children is desperately needed."

Professor Marshman and the team will be investigating a new approach, based on the principles of CBT which involves dental professionals, children and parents working together, using specially designed resources, to help understand why the child is anxious, give them information and choices about the procedures they may need, provide activities the children will find useful to help them cope, and make talking to the dentist easier.

There is strong evidence to support the use of CBT, a talking therapy, for other forms of anxiety and mental health conditions, however there is currently very limited research into CBT delivered specifically by dental professionals, rather than by psychologists for children with dental anxiety.

The self-help CBT resources were developed online and hard copy for children aged nine to 16 years and aim to help children provide dental information, suggest strategies for reducing anxiety, encourage reflection and support better communication.

"If our study finds CBT resources delivered by dental professionals are effective, then children can be helped directly in high street dental practices without the need to travel for dental treatment in hospitals," said Professor Marshman.

"This has the potential to help children who may otherwise spend a lifetime avoiding the dentist and ignoring potentially serious oral problems. It may also result in cost savings for the NHS."

The four-year CALM trial: the clinical and cost-effectiveness of a guided self-help [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) intervention to reduce dental [anxiety](#) in [children](#), is funded by the National Institute for Health Research and will be overseen by Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

The collaborative team of researchers from the universities of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, Cardiff, King's College London, Leeds, Newcastle and York, working closely with patient representatives, are looking to recruit 60 dentists to take part in the study which will start in September 2021.

Provided by University of Sheffield

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