

Healthy kids



If a mouthful of metal is in your child's future, know what you are getting into.

By Mary McIver Puthawala

There exists in the world of parenting only two relevant opinions to just about every subject: what we think and what our children think.

Take braces. As moms, when we hear the word "braces," we probably think mother lodes of metal in the mouth, and awkward appliances that are not only uncomfortable but extremely funky-looking. We think of lots of ice cream to numb the pain, or at least stop the whining (which is much harder to do while eating ice cream). And finally, as moms, the toughest thing to swallow is the cost of the whole endeavor. Depending on where you live in the United States, that can be anywhere between \$4,000 and \$8,000.

But what do our kids think once we've written out that check? Do they appreciate the fact that this process will not only provide them with a beautiful smile, but also improve their chances of retaining those pearly whites

into their old age? No. For most kids, what's important is what type of reception they'll get when they walk into class with a mouthful of hardware. Will he or she stick out?

NO MORE METAL MOUTH

Kid's anxiety over aesthetics is a matter that orthodontists have strived to address. "We're always trying to encourage kids to enjoy the process [of getting braces] and lessen their concerns," says Dr. Robert James Bray, president of the American Association of Orthodontics. The good news is that newer technologies have made silver bands and painful steel arch wires obsolete.

First, Bray says, orthodontists now use brackets that are glued onto the teeth, easing the trauma to teeth and therefore, the pain. The brackets can even be made of a ceramic tooth-colored material that renders them almost invisible.

Second, the arch wires—the ones that move the teeth—are attached to the brackets with bands that come in multiple hues to match school colors or even party outfits. The bands go on in a snap, eliminating long sessions in the chair and even longer laments at home.

GAIN WITH LITTLE PAIN

Arch wires aren't only more colorful, they're also more high tech. The modern variety is made of nickel-titanium instead of hard-to-manage stainless steel. In fact, they're custom-formed by robotic methods to fit perfectly. And when warmed to body temperature, the wire "remembers" the desired tooth position for the individual. Without frequent tinkering, they gently and continuously move the teeth into place.

The process works so well that kids today can go six to eight weeks between orthodontist visits. And after a few visits, the whole business becomes almost painless. Plus, this space-age technology can cut the length of treatment time significantly.

METAL OPTIONAL

Some folks who opt for orthodontia don't even use wires and brackets. One alternative, called Invisalign, uses clear plastic "aligners" that slip over the teeth. Besides being very difficult to detect, the mouth gear is also removable for occasions such as sports games or photo sessions. Which leads us to the downside: The aligners are removable! Thus, they can be lost. This type of treatment is best reserved for those responsible patients who don't lose shoes, belts, and/or homework assignments on a regular basis.

MONEY MATTERS

Last but not least, there is the issue of cost. Although the family dentist might offer to do the work at a cheaper rate, don't bite. An orthodontist has at least two to three more years of training than a dentist. Plus, an orthodontist can fix the toughest cases with the latest technology, causing the least amount of pain for your child, not to mention a reduced chance of complications. And having the process go smoothly is what everyone wants!