

Children's Preferences for Pediatric Dentist Attire: A Multicenter Study

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Background: Data are conflicting regarding the effect of professional staff attire on children at pediatric dental clinics. **Aim:** To compare the preferences of children and their parents in three countries, regarding the gender and attire of pediatric dentists. **Study design:** A multi-centered study was conducted in pediatric dental clinics in Israel (N=100), Uruguay (N=270) and Spain (N=200). Children, aged 4-12 years, and their parents were asked to choose the pediatric dentist they preferred from 5 pictures of the same male and 5 pictures of the same female, in different attire. **Results:** In Israeli clinics, where half of the pediatric dentists were male, and they wore white coats or casual attire, these were preferred by children, with no preference regarding the dentist's gender. In Spain, where the majority of dentists were females, wearing surgical scrubs, children preferred female dentists with this attire. In Uruguay, where female dentists wore surgical or pediatric scrubs, these were preferred by children. Parents more often selected female than male dentists; they preferred pediatric scrubs for their children's dentists more often than their children preferred such attire. **Conclusions:** Children's preferences for the attire of pediatric dentists reflected the common wearing apparel for dentists at the clinics they attended.

Keywords: Dentist attire, preference of attire, apparel for dentists

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INTRODUCTION

Type of wearing apparel of medical personnel can conceivably influence both patients and professional staff. Professional clothing worn by a dental team can increase anxiety in children due to fears that may arise from associations with other situations.¹ While a number of studies have been conducted regarding the influence and preference of medical staff attire on children and adults in different medical settings, no agreement has been reached. Adult patients were found not to have a preference for surgical scrubs or for white coat or surgical attire.² On the other hand, among pediatric 4-8 year old patients in the emergency department, physician attire appeared to impact the relationship with the child.³ In another study, parents showed a clear preference for choosing an orthodontist for their children according to factors that are not within the control of the practitioner (sex and age), as well as factors that can be changed by the practitioner (such as attire and hairstyle).⁴

In a pediatric dental faculty, parents were found to favor traditional dress, as it elicits an air of professionalism. One study showed children to prefer dental students in casual attire.⁵ However, among 827 Istanbul school children aged 8-14 years, who were shown photos of dentists wearing different clothing, almost half selected formal attire as their choice for their dentists. This finding does not support the popular view that white coats raise anxiety levels in children. Nonetheless, in response to a questionnaire, only 51% of women dentists felt the need to wear a lab coat over their street clothes. Interestingly, women dentists who reported the highest gross incomes were more likely to wear street

clothes without a lab coat. The study suggested that dressing for success and infection control was a professional issue. Regarding the effect of physician dress style on patient confidence, patients of all ages who consulted with physicians in a hospital or private practice reported more confidence in physicians who wore professional white coats.⁶

In this multicenter study, we examined and compared the preferences of children and their parents in three countries, regarding the gender and attire of pediatric dentists.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study was conducted in Israel, Uruguay and Spain, and was approved by the Hadassah Human Subjects Institutional Board, the Institutional Board of the Universidad Católica del Uruguay and the Institutional Board CEIC (Comité Ético de Investigación Clínica) of the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya.

A questionnaire was developed specifically for this research. Before its administration to the study participants, reliability and content validity were tested. Two researchers (ED, DR) administered the questionnaire to 10 cooperative children and to their accompanying parents, to assess clarity and ease of use. These volunteers expressed that they did not have any difficulty in understanding the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to the same group again after at least one month to test the reliability and consistency of answers. This pilot testing produced a reliability of 90%.

A total of 570 children aged 4 to 12 years old (100 from Israel, 200 from Spain and 270 from Uruguay) who visited dental clinics, and one of their accompanying parents, participated in the study.

In Israel, the study was conducted both in the department of pediatric dentistry of the Hadassah Hospital where 10 male and 10 female senior pediatric dentists work and in a private clinic of a female specialist in paediatric dentistry. Seventy percent of the children were interviewed in the university clinic and 30% in a private clinic (of a female dentist).

In Spain, the study was conducted at the pediatric dentistry clinic of the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, where 16 female and 2 male senior pediatric dentists work. In Uruguay, the setting was both a pediatric private dental clinic with 2 female pediatric dentists and a pediatric dentistry public service clinic with 8 female pediatric dentists.

Children and their parents were interviewed according to the questionnaire, separately with the same set of pictures. During the interview, children and parents did not know the answers of the other. The children's questionnaire included demographic data as well as the following questions: Have you ever been in a dental office? Do you prefer a male dentist or a female dentist? The children were then shown a set of 10 pictures (Appendix 1) and were requested to choose the picture of their preference. The pictures depicted male and female dentists in different attire. The children were asked to explain their choice. This was an open question. In analysis of the data, we grouped the responses according to content.

The parents' questionnaire included demographic data and questions: Which attire do you think is more appropriate

for the dentist who treats your child? (Choose among the same 10 pictures presented to the children). Do you think that type of attire could influence the relationship between your child and the dentist? Do you think that type of attire can affect children's behavior in the dental setting? Do you think that the dental assistant should be dressed like the dentist?

Five of the 10 pictures depicted a male dentist and 5 a female dentist. The background, posture, hairstyle and physical appearance were identical for the pictures of the male, and identical for the pictures of the female. The same male dentist and female dentist were dressed with different attire: pictures 1 and 6, white coat; pictures 2 and 7, surgical scrubs; pictures 3 and 8, pediatric scrubs; pictures 4 and 9, casual attire (jeans and t-shirt); pictures 5 and 10, professional attire (white shirt and skirt, or necktie and black tailored trousers).

Statistical analysis

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. The frequencies of categorical variables by study groups were analyzed by the "Chi square test" (a parametric test) or by "Fisher-Irwin exact test" (a non-parametric test for small samples). All statistical tests were analyzed to a significance level of 0.05. The data were analyzed for each country separately and were compared between the countries.

RESULTS

The proportions of female children participants were 50 (50%) in Israel, 103 (51.5%) in Spain and 134 (49.6%) in Uruguay. The proportions of children in the younger age group (4 to 6 years old) were 26 (26%) in Israel, 35 (17.5%) in Spain, and 87 (32.2%) in Uruguay. Comparing distributions of the age of the children between Israel and Spain and between Israel and Uruguay, the differences were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). Comparing distributions of the age of the children between Spain and Uruguay, the differences were statistically significant ($p = 0.0001$). In all three countries, more mothers than fathers participated in the study and more parents were aged 36-45 years than younger or older than this range (Table 1). For most of the children from Spain (90%) and from Israel (79%), the visit was their first at a dental clinic, compared to only 8.2% from Uruguay.

Children's preference of dentist gender

In Israel, 22% of the children preferred a female dentist, 35% preferred a male; and for 43% the gender of their dentist did not matter. In Spain, 65% preferred a female dentist and 35% preferred a male. In Uruguay, 72% preferred a female dentist and 28% a male.

Children's and parents' preferences of attire by country

Children in Israel preferred a male dentist in a white coat, a female dentist in a white coat and a female dentist in casual attire (28%, 18% and 12% respectively) (Table 2). Israeli parents preferred a female dentist in pediatric scrubs, a female dentist in casual attire, and a male dentist in casual attire (22%, 18% and 16%, respectively) (Table 3).

Table 1. Gender and age of the participating parents, by country

Parents	variable	All N=570 (%)	Israel N=100	Spain N=200	Uruguay N=270	p
Gender	Mother	414 (72.6)	71 (71.0)	136 (68.0)	207 (76.7)	a: †0.1050 b: †0.5960 c: †0.2630 d: †0.0360*
	Father	156 (27.4)	29 (29.0)	64 (32.0)	63 (23.3)	
Age (years)	2=20-35	165 (29.0)	29 (29.0)	27 (13.5)	109 (40.4)	a: †0.0001**
	3=36-45	321 (56.3)	47 (47.0)	138 (69.0)	136 (50.4)	b: †0.0001**
	4=45+	84 (14.7)	24 (24.0)	35 (17.5)	25 (9.2)	c: †0.0010** d: †0.0001**

p value by †chi square test; **p≤0.01;

a: Israel vs. Spain vs. Uruguay; b: Israel vs. Spain; c: Israel vs. Uruguay; d: Spain vs. Uruguay

Table 2. Children's preference of attire by country. Data are presented as n (%)

Attire	All N=570	Israel N=100	Spain N=200	Uruguay N=270	p
Female white coat	48 (8.4)	18 (18.0)	14 (7.0)	16 (5.9)	a: †0.0010** b: †0.0040** c: †0.0010** d: †0.6380
Female in surgical scrub	151 (26.5)	6 (6.0)	66 (33.0)	79 (29.3)	a: †0.0001** b: †0.0001** c: †0.0001** d: †0.3850
Female in paediatric scrub	98 (17.2)	7 (7.0)	23 (11.5)	68 (25.2)	a: †0.0001** b: †0.2210 c: †0.0001** d: †0.0001**
Female in jeans and t-shirt	43 (7.5)	12 (12.0)	20 (10.0)	11 (4.1)	a: †0.0010** b: †0.5970 c: †0.0050** d: †0.0100**
Female in professional attire	33 (5.8)	7 (7.0)	8 (4.0)	18 (6.7)	a: †0.4020 b: †0.2610 c: †0.9100 d: †0.2110
Male in white coat	57 (10.0)	28 (28.0)	12 (6.0)	17 (6.3)	a: †0.0001** b: †0.0001** c: †0.0001** d: †0.8950
Male in surgical scrub	52 (9.1)	3 (3.0)	23 (11.5)	26 (9.6)	a: †0.0370* b: †0.0150* c: †0.0470* d: †0.5120
Male in pediatric scrub	44 (7.7)	7 (7.0)	12 (6.0)	25 (9.2)	a: †0.4060 b: †0.7370 c: †0.4920 d: †0.1950
Male in jeans and t-shirt	17 (3.0)	7 (7.0)	6 (3.0)	4 (1.5)	a: †0.0260* b: †0.1090 c: †0.0110* d: †0.3370
Male in professional attire	27 (4.8)	5 (5.0)	16 (8.0)	6 (2.2)	a: †0.0130* b: †0.4720 c: †0.1760 d: †0.0030

p value by †chi square test or by †Exact test; ** p≤0.01; *p≤0.05

a: Israel vs. Spain vs. Uruguay; b: Israel vs. Spain; c: Israel vs. Uruguay; d: Spain vs. Uruguay

Table 3. Parents' preference of attire by country. Data are presented as n (%)

Attire	All N=570	Israel N=100	Spain N=200	Uruguay N=270	p
Female white coat	34 (6.0)	13 (13.0)	9 (4.5)	12 (4.4)	a: †0.0050** b: †0.0080** c: †0.0040** d: †0.9770
Female in surgical scrub	161 (28.2)	12 (12.0)	82 (41.0)	67 (24.8)	a: †0.0001** b: †0.0001** c: †0.0080** d: †0.0001**
Female in pediatric scrub	258 (45.2)	22 (22.0)	83 (41.5)	153 (56.7)	a: †0.0001** b: †0.0010** c: †0.0001** d: †0.0010**
Female in jeans and t-shirt	24 (4.2)	18 (18.0)	6 (3.0)		a: †0.0001** b: †0.0001** c: †0.0001** d: †0.0060**
Female in professional attire	7 (1.2)	6 (6.0)	1 (0.5)		a: †0.0001** b: †0.0060** c: †0.0001** d: †0.4260
Male in white coat	14 (2.5)	7 (7.0)	2 (1.0)	5 (1.9)	a: †0.0090** b: †0.0070** c: †0.0200* d: †0.7040
Male in surgical scrub	36 (6.3)	5 (5.0)	13 (6.5)	18 (6.6)	a: †0.8740 b: †0.7980 c: †0.6360 d: †0.9430
Male in pediatric scrub	18 (3.2)	1 (1.0)	4 (2.0)	13 (4.8)	a: †0.1250 b: †0.6680 c: †0.1240 d: †0.1360
Male in jeans and t-shirt	17 (3.0)	16 (16.0)		1 (0.4)	a: †0.0001** b: †0.0001** c: †0.0001** d: †1.0000
Male in professional attire	1 (0.2)			1 (0.4)	a: †1.0000

p value by †chi square test or by †Exact test; ** p≤0.01; *p≤0.05;

a: Israel Vs. Spain vs. Uruguay; b: Israel vs. Spain; c: Israel vs. Uruguay; d: Spain vs. Uruguay

In Spain, the children preferred a female dentist in surgical scrubs, a female dentist in pediatric scrubs, a male dentist in surgical scrubs and a female dentist in casual attire (33%, 11.5% and 11.5%, 10% respectively) (Table 2). Parents in Spain preferred a female dentist in pediatric scrubs and a female dentist in surgical scrubs (41.5 and 41.0% respectively) (Table 3).

Children in Uruguay preferred a female dentist in surgical scrubs, a female dentist in pediatric scrubs, a male dentist in surgical scrubs and a male in pediatric scrubs (29.3%, 25.2%, 9.6% and 9.2%) (Table 2). Parents of children in Uruguay preferred a female dentist in pediatric scrubs and a female dentist in surgical scrubs (56.7% and 24.8%) (Table 3).

Children's reasons for their preferences in attire

When asked why they preferred a dentist with certain attire, 32% of Israeli children said they did not know and 20% stated that their choice most looked like a dentist (Table 4). Among Spanish children, 26.5% explained their preference by the color of the clothing, 16.5% said that was what they liked, and 16.5% said they did not have a reason for their preference. Among children from Uruguay, 19.3% said their preference was because of the color, 18.5% said they liked the drawings and 18.5% said the outfit was nice, with the skirt or tie.

Parents' questionnaire

Eighty-one percent of the parents from Israel, 76% from Spain and 83% from Uruguay responded that a dentist's attire may influence a child's relationship with the dentist (Table 5). Seventy-eight percent of the parents from Israel, 67% from Spain and 76% from Uruguay responded that a dentist's attire may influence a child's behavior. Thirty-eight percent of the parents from Israel, 49% from Spain and 44% from Uruguay responded that the dental assistant should be dressed like the dentist.

Table 4- Children's reasons for their preferences in attire, by country. Data are presented as n (%) Reason

	All N=570 (%)	Israel N=100 (%)	Spain N=200 (%)	Uruguay N=270 (%)	p
Color	109 (19.1)	4 (4.0)	53 (26.5)	52 (19.3)	a: \perp 0.0001** b: \perp 0.0010** c: \perp 0.0001** d: \perp 0.0620
Drawings	73 (12.8)	1 (1.0)	22 (11.0)	50 (18.5)	a: \perp 0.0001** b: \perp 0.0001** c: \perp 0.0001** d: \perp 0.0250*
I don't know	108 (19.0)	32 (32.0)	32 (16.0)	44 (16.3)	a: \perp 0.0001** b: \perp 0.0010** c: \perp 0.0010** d: \perp 0.9310
Attire, has skirt, a tie, just it is nice	75 (13.2)	7 (7.0)	18 (9.0)	50 (18.5)	a: \perp 0.0010** b: \perp 0.5550 c: \perp 0.0060** d: \perp 0.0040**
Because I like it	70 (12.3)	7 (7.0)	33 (16.5)	30 (11.1)	a: \perp 0.0440* b: \perp 0.0220* c: \perp 0.2420 d: \perp 0.0900
Looks like a dentist	47 (8.2)	20 (20.0)	10 (5.0)	17 (6.3)	a: \perp 0.0001** b: \perp 0.0001** c: \perp 0.0001** d: \perp 0.5500
Gender	4 (0.7)			4 (1.5)	a: \perp 0.1770 b: c: \perp 0.5780 d: \perp 0.1400

p value by \perp chi square test or by \perp Exact test; ** p \leq 0.01; *p \leq 0.05

a: Israel vs. Spain vs. Uruguay; b: Israel vs. Spain; c: Israel vs. Uruguay; d: Spain vs. Uruguay

Table 5 Parents' answers to the study's questions by country. Data are presented as n (%).

Parents	Country	All N=570	Israel N=100	Spain N=200	Uruguay N=270	p
Question No.1	Yes	456 (80.0)	81 (81.0)	151 (75.5)	224 (83.0)	a: †0.1300
	No	83 (14.6)	3 (3.0)	38 (19.0)	42 (15.5)	b: †0.2830
	Doesn't matter	31 (5.4)	16 (16.0)	11 (5.5)	4 (1.5)	c: †0.6590 d: †0.0460*
Question No.2	Yes	416 (73.0)	78 (78.0)	133 (66.5)	205 (76.0)	a: †0.0350*
	No	116 (20.3)	8 (8.0)	55 (27.5)	53 (19.6)	b: †0.0400*
	Doesn't matter	38 (6.7)	14 (14.0)	12 (6.0)	12 (4.4)	c: †0.6760 d: †0.0250*
Question No.3	Yes	256 (44.9)	38 (38.0)	98 (49.0)	120 (44.4)	a: †0.1910
	No	163 (28.6)	39 (39.0)	53 (26.5)	71 (26.3)	b: †0.0710
	Doesn't matter	151 (26.5)	23 (23.0)	49 (24.5)	79 (29.3)	c: †0.2660 d: †0.3270

p value by †chi square test; * p≤0.05

a: Israel Vs. Spain Vs. Uruguay; b: Israel Vs. Spain; c: Israel Vs. Uruguay; d: Spain vs. Uruguay

DISCUSSION

We found significant differences among children and parents of different countries regarding their preferences of the gender and attire of pediatric dentists. All three study populations comprised about half girls and half boys; therefore, the children's gender was not the reason for the differences in preferences.

We assumed that a child would prefer casual attire, such that the dentist would not "look like" a medical or dental professional; that this would be less frightening and seem friendlier to the child. However, children's preferences reflected the common attire for pediatric dentists at the clinics they attend. In Israel, part of the study was conducted in a university clinic, where the pediatric dentists wear a white coat and the numbers of male and female dentists are similar. A greater proportion of children in this clinic preferred a white coat than did children in Spain and Uruguay. In addition, part of the study in Israel was conducted in a private female pediatric dentist's clinic where the attire is casual: jeans and a color t-shirt. A higher proportion of the children interviewed at this clinic preferred this casual attire than did children interviewed in the university clinic.

In Spain, the study was conducted in a university clinic that employed 16 female and 2 male pediatric dentists who wear surgical scrubs. This was the attire preferred by most of the children at this clinic.

In Uruguay, children's preferences corresponded with the gender and attire of the dentists at the two clinics where the study was conducted: females wearing surgical scrubs in one of the clinics and cartoon scrubs in the other.

Our findings are in accordance with a review of 11533 adult patients that reported that perceptions of attire are influenced by age, geographic location, setting and context of care.⁷

Apparently, the concept of "white coat fear" does not appear in children interviewed in the university clinic in Israel, where this is the common attire. Rather, this was the attire the children most preferred. This finding concurs with a recent

study that attempted to rule out the stereotyped concept of 'white coat fear' among children and found that both children and parents favored traditional white coat attire, contrary to popular belief.⁸ In a study of patients of all ages in France, children at a hospital most frequently preferred physicians with white coats, both male and female.⁶

Most of the children in our study did not prefer casual attire for a dentist, and only those children who attended a pediatric dental clinic where the dentists' attire is casual preferred such attire. This contrasts with a study that reported that children treated by dental students preferred them in casual attire.⁵ Most of the pediatric dentists in the University of Barcelona and in the clinics in Montevideo where the study was conducted are women. This may explain the preference for female dentists among the children from Spain and Uruguay. In Spain most of the pediatric dentists at the clinic where the survey was conducted are women and the usual attire is surgical scrubs. It is not surprising then that most of the children preferred female dentists in surgical scrubs, followed by pediatric scrubs, and fewer children preferred males in surgical scrubs. In contrast, in the Israeli clinic, which employed male and female dentists equally, most of the children did not express a preference for their dentist's gender.

Children found it difficult to explain why they chose a specific attire. The reasons for choosing particular attires were generally intuitive ("I don't know", "it is nice", "I like it"). In Spain and in Uruguay, children gave more specific reasons, such as "color", "drawing", which corresponded with the attire worn in the clinics they visited. Our findings support the existence of a familiarity bias in children. Such bias has been shown to be more pronounced in children than in adults.⁹

Parent preferences differed according to their resident countries. Only 20% of the parents in Israel who attend the pediatric dental clinic in the hospital and a female private pediatric dental clinic preferred males or females in white coats. Parents did not show any specific preference regarding

attire, but significantly preferred a female pediatric dentist and there was a strong similarity between parents and children regarding the attire that they did not choose: males in surgical scrubs and females in professional attire: skirts and white shirts. It is interesting that parents thought that males in white coats is less appropriate for their children, while the children, who attended the hospital clinic chose this attire in a high percentage (28%). Similarly, in Uruguay, more than twice the number of parents preferred pediatric to surgical scrubs; while surgical scrubs were preferred by their children. We presume that this difference between parents and children may be attributed to parents' anxiety. The same situation was found in Spain, where children preferred surgical scrubs (33%) in a similar proportion as their parents (41%), but only 11% of the children chose pediatric scrubs, while their parents significantly preferred this attire (42%). This may be due to parents' anxiety of dental treatment and their desire for a friendlier attire, which may emit a different meaning for the child.

Panda *et al* found that although children in their study indicated certain preferences regarding their dentists' appearance, these preferences carry little weight when compared to personal attributes of the dentist such as kindness, patience and clinical competence.¹⁰

Though several studies in the literature addressed preferences of children and parents in medical and dental settings, the findings are not conclusive. Lacking in these studies is a description of the attire familiar to children, in the dental clinics they attend. We found that children's responses about the gender and attire of dentists corresponded with the characteristics that were familiar and known to them. We assumed that children would prefer friendly attire like cartoon scrubs or jeans and t-shirt. However, children who were interviewed in the hospital preferred dentists in white coats; children who attended a dental clinic where dentists are dressed in color scrubs preferred that attire, and so on. Our study supports the notion that children prefer to stay with the "well known" and prefer less changes. The relationship with the dentist is evidently more important and valuable than the attire.

CONCLUSIONS

Children's preferences for the attire of pediatric dentists reflected the common wearing apparel for dentists at the clinics they attended.

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APPENDIX 1:

THE SET OF 10 PICTURES OF DENTISTS PRESENTED TO CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS.

