



The Dentist

At the age of just 31, Dr. Ashleigh Sebros is already a rising star in the field of pediatric dentistry. In 2018 she was voted one of *Incisal Magazine's* 40 under 40, and she already has her own pediatric dentistry practice in Wilton, CT. We talk to her about what it's taken to get to where she is today and what she loves about her job.

Ashleigh, thank you so much for talking to us and congratulations on being selected as one of the 40 under 40—that's quite an accomplishment! Can you tell us a little about your job?
Yes! I am a pediatric dentist, and what that entails is dentistry for children aged 1 - 18. That means prevention, education, and obviously treatment of cavities and things like that.

Why did you specifically want to work in pediatric dentistry?
Well, I've wanted to be a dentist since I was five. I loved my dentist growing up and I thought dentistry was really cool. I had a really nice guy who was my dentist, Dr. Jones, and he used to let me touch everything in his office—much to my mother's chagrin! And so growing up I was like "OK, so I'm going to do dentistry!" When I actually got to dental school, I had been working with children my whole life as a Girl Scout troop leader volunteer, a volunteer in children's museums, and at summer camps, so pediatric dentistry seemed a natural fit. I like working with kids and I like being able to demystify dentistry for them and make it less scary. The dentist is a frightening place for many people, and that stems mostly from their experience as a child. My goal is to have them have a good experience as a child, then they will not grow up to be an adult who is scared of the dentist.

I'm really interested that you were in Girl Scouts, so many women who are leaders and role models used to belong to that organization.
Yes. I did Brownies and Scouts. You get a lot out of it, such as organizational skills and working as a team, also working towards a goal in a group. Growing up it was just nice to be around other girls, and you're working together and not focused on anything else other than the task at hand.

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What was your school experience like?
I went to an all girls high school, which I really think was a great thing for me. Everyone was just focused on school and they weren't trying to get attention or one-up one another. There wasn't really bullying. It was, "OK, you're in school now, you're playing sports, you're going for leadership positions." They were very encouraging of us taking leadership in the school and in the community. So that was really nice.

That sounds like a great environment.
It was. And the girls were supportive too. I didn't run into that cliquey, bullying behavior that people think you find at all girls schools. Everyone was really supportive. The popular girls were the nice girls!

Did you focus primarily on the sciences at school?

Yes—that was always my wheelhouse. I loved math and science and again, at my school, there was no stigma. Everyone wanted to be on honor role or on student council. Everyone wanted to be a leader. I mean I've always been a nerd, but it was a great place for me! I also took music. I play piano, clarinet, drums and I did dance classes outside of school.

So quite varied interests! What about college?
I went to McGill University in Montreal for my undergrad and then I went to SUNY Buffalo (State University of New York) for dental school. That's where I realized I wanted to do pediatrics, which is a specialty of dentistry, so that's additional schooling. So I ended up in Philadelphia at Temple University for my pediatric dental residency for an additional two years.

That's a lot of schooling. What was your residency like?
It was hospital-based, so we had a clinic in the hospital, mostly seeing underprivileged children. We did check ups, cleanings, sedations, extractions, and orthodontics, and we treated special needs children. It was an intense program but I felt really well prepared after it. I saw a lot of patients and went to the OR 120 times during my time there.

What was your next step after your residency?
I graduated my residency in 2015 and then I worked part time in Philadelphia. I

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Dr. Ashleigh



Dr. Ashleigh Sebro graduating dental school

was dating my now husband and he said we should move to NY, and I found a job in NY in the Bronx. That job didn't actually work out, so I went back to my old job and I was commuting from NY to Philadelphia a few times a week. That was tough. So then I started working at a practice in Scarsdale, NY, and then one in CT.

Did you always know you wanted to open your own practice one day?

Yes. That was always the end goal. So all of the practices I've worked in have all been very different, so I can choose aspects of each practice style that fit in with how I like to work. I was working in Connecticut and I was looking around for a place to open a practice and came across Wilton. It was the perfect place—lots of kids and no pediatric dentist in town!

Do you do a lot of work with kids who have special needs?

Yes. Pediatric dentistry comprises neurotypical patients ages 1 - 18 and also special needs patients—we see adults as well. I have patients who are on the spectrum, I have children who are nonverbal. I have

children with visual and hearing disabilities. We are able to adapt and figure out a way for them to have a pleasant appointment. The parents are really happy about that because it can be hard to find a dentist if your child has those kinds of challenges.

What are some of the tools that you use to put kids who may be anxious and patients who may have special needs at ease?

You can come here 20 times and just say hi before you get in the chair—giving them time to get to trust me makes a big difference. We have a TV on the ceiling. They can watch TV, get a sticker, go home. The next time we might try getting in the chair or using a toothbrush. It's just a gradual desensitization process.

Setting up your own business is a pretty big step. How did you know where to start?

Because I've wanted to do this my whole life, I was actually reading about the business side of dentistry even before I got into dental school! I took a few courses

on things like architecture, construction, equipment supply chain management, etc., and then honestly a lot of it is just trusting my gut. Both of my parents are in finance, so I'm lucky that I did grow up with a good amount of financial literacy, and they really hammered home "Don't sign anything until you read it!" —so those two things have really helped me. I honestly really enjoy the business side, which makes it easier, because it is gruelling to do both. The teeth are the easy part—it's HR, and accounting, and taxes, and overhead, and marketing, and all that; so right now I wear many hats! Eventually, as we get bigger I'll be able to delegate some of that, but right now it's my baby because it's still a brand new practice.

Talking to you, you are obviously someone with a huge amount of confidence and self belief. Where do you think that comes from?

I would credit my parents with that. They always reinforced self-esteem and told me they knew that I could do this. They always had really high expectations of me

growing up. Never in a demeaning way—in a "we know you're intelligent, we know you can do it"—kind of way. Of course, there are moments when I have doubts. The first month I opened I was like "What did I do? What's going on—I have to pay bills!" I talk to my mom almost every day and I was like "Mom, what did I do—I took out this huge loan and I'm six months pregnant."

She said: "Ashleigh, you've done the math. Go back and look at your numbers. You have enough patients, you know how much your overhead is. You can do this." So I have very supportive parents!

You were pregnant when you opened your practice?

It's been a busy year! I figured, let's just get all the craziness all in one year. Let's rip the bandaid off. My daughter is 13 weeks old.

Wow. Congratulations! It's great that you have that support from your parents. I read you've done pro bono work. Can you tell us about that?

When I was in dental school, four other people and I set up this interest club for pediatric dentistry. It was so people interested specifically in pediatric dentistry could get more exposure to it.

Part of what we did was to run early maternal infant classes and teen mom programs at a women and children's hospital. We wanted to educate people in at risk communities. Dental cavities are contagious and people don't know. Kids aren't born with bacteria in their mouths, it has to be introduced. Parents might share a spoon with a kid, and if you put a spoon in their mouth it puts them at higher risk.

Wow, I had no idea!

It's true. Educating people on things like that and things like if you're breastfeeding and your baby has teeth you should be brushing them.

We also offered kids free dental treatment. There's a national endeavor called Give Kids a Smile, which is run by The American Association of Pediatric Dentistry. It takes place in February each year and it's a day where underprivileged children can get free dental work. We wanted to do it more often. We opened a dental



One of Dr. Ash's patients from her outreach program

practice on a Saturday and we gave away about \$9000 worth of free dental care to kids. These were kids who fell in the gap. Their parents had enough money, so that they didn't qualify for state assistance, but they couldn't afford to pay. Also we bused in the Amish children, because typically their dental care is intermittent.

The club is still going today— which is awesome!

That is fantastic! And you've also been on some mission trips to other countries?

We went to Dominican Republic in dental school. We took over a school and made it into a clinic. In one week we extracted 800 teeth and saw about 2000 people. Everyone was so happy and I loved being able to help so many people.

Going to the dentist is one of those things not everybody loves. Does it bother you at all when people come into your practice and they don't want to be there?

No—because I know I can convince them! But I would say honestly that about 20% of my patients are upset. 80% are like "Hi Dr. Ash!" and we high five and they get in the chair, watch TV, get stickers. They're hanging out!

That 20% are kids who are just naturally nervous, in which case we can win them over with time, or it's children who had a bad experience before, in which case I have to undo that and make them trust me.

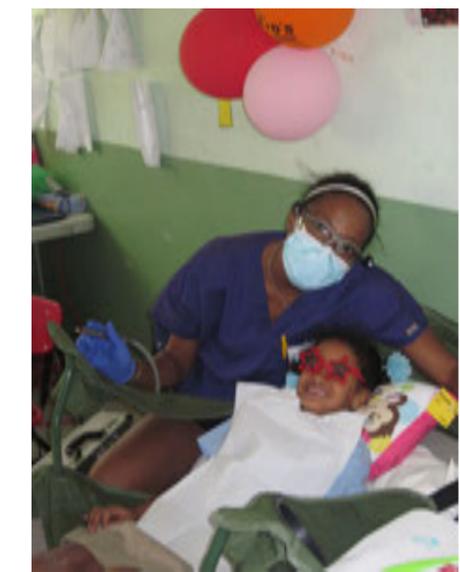
That's actually the most rewarding part of my job—converting a scared patient into not necessarily an excited-to-come-and-see-me patient, but one who will get in the chair willingly and then leave with a smile!

You talk about treating the whole child—not just the teeth?

Yes. For me, because my goal is good adult patients, the most important thing is to build a good relationship. At the end of the day if that child trusts you it's great. Mom is happy, the child is happy, I'm happy!

I try to figure out why kids are upset. Some don't like the taste or the sound. Those are things I can fix. Figuring out why they're scared is a huge part. A cavity today can probably wait a few weeks if it takes that long to build their trust. I need them to trust me so that when they're 14, 15, and 16, and I need to ask them about lifestyle and habits, they're honest with me.

Distraction is huge too when you're working with young kids. Something I do is when I'm doing their fillings I tell them I'm drawing a picture. So I ask them which



Dr. Ash treating a patient in the Dominican Republic

picture they want and say they have to stay really still so the picture won't be ugly. I tell them that I cover it with white afterward so they don't get distracted at school and also to explain why they can't see a drawing in their tooth!

What attributes do you think are important in someone who wants to become a dentist?

Well, in order to start your own practice you need confidence—maybe to the point of being a little bit crazy! You also need attention to detail and to be a people person. To go to dental school you need to have good grades and study hard. And you need to be willing to go to school for a decade! You also need extracurriculars and volunteer time to be a well rounded applicant.

I know you find working with children rewarding. What else do you love about your job?

I like working with the children and I like the instant gratification of dentistry. With something like orthodontics it takes years to see the results, but for me: drill it, fill it, done. It's fixed. The fast pace suits me.

What does a day in the life of Dr. Ashleigh Sebro look like?

A day in the life? Well, I wake up at 4:30 am with my daughter who needs a feeding. Some days I'll go back to sleep and some days I will stay up and pay bills and answer emails. I do all my own social media for the business, so once every 3-4 weeks I'll schedule a month's worth of posts. I get into work about 8:30 am. My day consists of seeing patients. In between appointments I return phone calls, and do inventory. At the end of the day I go through the day's reports and make sure everything's billed out correctly for sending claims in. I have an assistant and someone who works on reception for me who are just great, but at the end of the day I still have to make sure everything is cleaned properly and that everything has been sterilized and put back to base, ready for the next day. Seeing as it's my own business the buck stops with me, so if there's a plumbing emergency or something similar, it's on me to stay until it's sorted out. I leave work around 5:00 pm and get to have my dinner at home.

Do sports, do dance classes, do music, do art. All that stuff makes you a more well rounded person, and that makes you a more rounded doctor.

Dentistry has a really nice work-life balance. You have the decade of school part, but after that it's one of the better medical professions for work/life balance. If you want to be a doctor who gets to go home for dinner—pick dentistry!

You've already talked about your childhood dentist having a big influence on you. Are there other role models and mentors who have helped you along the way?

Yes, Dr. Jones was a big influence. But when I got to dental school I had a really great mentor. Her name was Dian Wells. She's a pediatric dentist. I'm Trinidadian, she's also Trinidadian, and she is phenomenal. She first said to me "these teeth are attached to people—you can't just treat the teeth." I count her as one of my mentors for sure. Then there was a dental assistant in our pediatric clinic called Katrina who was like my second mom. I still Facetime her all the time for advice and just to chat.

Are women well represented in dentistry?

Yes! Dentistry reached parity in the last decade, and in my class it was half men and half women. When I was in residency I would say that we had more female than male instructors, and they were really laser sharp. Obviously medicine used to be dominated by men, but we're kinda' coming in and taking over, which is great!

What advice would you have for someone reading this who really wants to become a dentist?

If she's interested in dentistry there's The American Academy of Women Dentists, and I'm sure that any one of us lady dentists would be happy to have a girl in our office shadowing us and having us show them the ropes. So I would recommend reaching out to a female dentist in your area.

Also, I would say, even if you're interested in medicine, go after all the things you're interested in. So do sports, do dance classes, do music, do art. All that stuff makes you a more well rounded person, and that makes you a more rounded doctor. No one wants to go and see a doctor who has been in school the whole time and who doesn't have any life experience. You want to go to someone you can relate to. All that extra stuff helps you become a better doctor in the future, so do what you enjoy!

Ashleigh, thanks so much for talking to us. We wish you every success as your practice continues to grow!



"This patient is in the Dominican Republic hugging me after I built up his front teeth that were broken."

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SIGNS YOU LOVE YOURSELF

Learning to love and accept yourself for who you are is the key to happiness in life. Most of us are works in progress. See how many of these signs apply to you!

- 1 You're not scared to ask for what you want.
- 2 You're not scared to say what you *don't* want.
- 3 You believe in yourself and you know that if you set your mind to it, you can do anything.
- 4 You've worked out that you don't have to be "friends" with everyone. If they don't really care about you, you can let them go.
- 5 You stand up for yourself when you need to and you defend yourself and your thoughts to others.
- 6 You know your opinion is valid and that you have a voice that needs to be listened to.
- 7 You don't feel you have to act a certain way or do certain things to be someone else's idea of cool. You're cool enough just being you!
- 8 When you make mistakes, you forgive yourself and move on.
- 9 You actively seek out people who inspire you—both in person and on social media if you're on it.
- 10 You know that other people's successes aren't your failures, which means you can be happy for them without feeling bad about yourself.
- 11 When you achieve something great you're not afraid to be in the spotlight, take the credit, and shine!
- 12 You respect yourself and you don't put up with other people who don't.
- 13 When you find yourself thinking negative thoughts about yourself you turn them into positive affirmations instead.
- 14 You know your own strengths and weaknesses and accept yourself for who you are.
- 15 You take care of yourself by keeping yourself clean and healthy and by thinking about what you put into your body.
- 16 You listen to your body and not the latest trends. You let yourself sleep and exercise when you need to.
- 17 You take time out once a day, no matter how busy you are, to do something that makes you happy.
- 18 You look after your mental health by accepting your emotions, but also by being mindful and recognizing when you may need extra help.
- 19 You've accepted that you can't please everyone all of the time, and that what you really need to do is to be true to yourself.
- 20 You trust your gut feelings.
- 21 You like who you see when you look in the mirror—because you know you are doing your best and you are enough.

