

# Parental Perception and Motivation for the use of Therapy Dogs in the Dental Office

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## BACKGROUND

Dental anxiety in children is common and can pose a barrier to receiving care. Nonpharmacological therapies like the use of therapy dogs in the dental setting are promising areas of research for this issue. Therapy dogs are used for physical, cognitive, and emotional rehabilitation and intervention that have favorable effects on children with autism and attention deficit disorder.<sup>1,2</sup> The use of therapy dogs in general medical settings has been shown to decrease anxiety and pain, as well as increase coping and positive behavior in patients.<sup>3,4</sup> Preliminary studies in dentistry show similar results in reducing dental anxiety and stress and helping introduce patients to the dental environment.<sup>5</sup>

The question remains that if dental therapy dogs are helpful in reducing anxiety and pain then what may be the reasons why more practitioners are not using them in their practices. One factor may be due parental concerns of having a dog with their child. From the parental perspective, previous research found that caregivers had concerns regarding safety, zoonosis, and appointment efficiency. They identified that 90% of caregivers found therapy dogs acceptable and 68% showed demand for using therapy dogs in the dental setting.<sup>2</sup> Previous study's limitations were that they surveyed a predominantly White or Caucasian population and parents of older children; the present study surveyed a younger and largely Hispanic population.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to understand parental motivations for using therapy dogs at their child's dental visit and what concerns deter them from the use of therapy dogs.

## METHODS

This survey-based cross-sectional study utilized a convenience sample of parents or legal guardians of children ages 0 to 17 years old who were patients of USC Pediatric Dental Clinic and Healthy Smiles for Kids of Orange County. IRB approval was obtained. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables of interest.

**Table 1:** Demographics of parents surveyed

Parent/Guardian	%	N
Mothers	86.25	69
Fathers	12.5	10
Other legal guardians	1.25	1
Ethnicities of parents	%	N
Hispanic or Latino	77.5	62
White or Caucasian	11.25	9
Asian or Pacific Islander	8.75	7
Black or African American	2.5	2
Highest Level of Education	%	N
High school graduates	51.25	41
Associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's or higher	35	28
Less than high school	13.75	11

## RESULTS

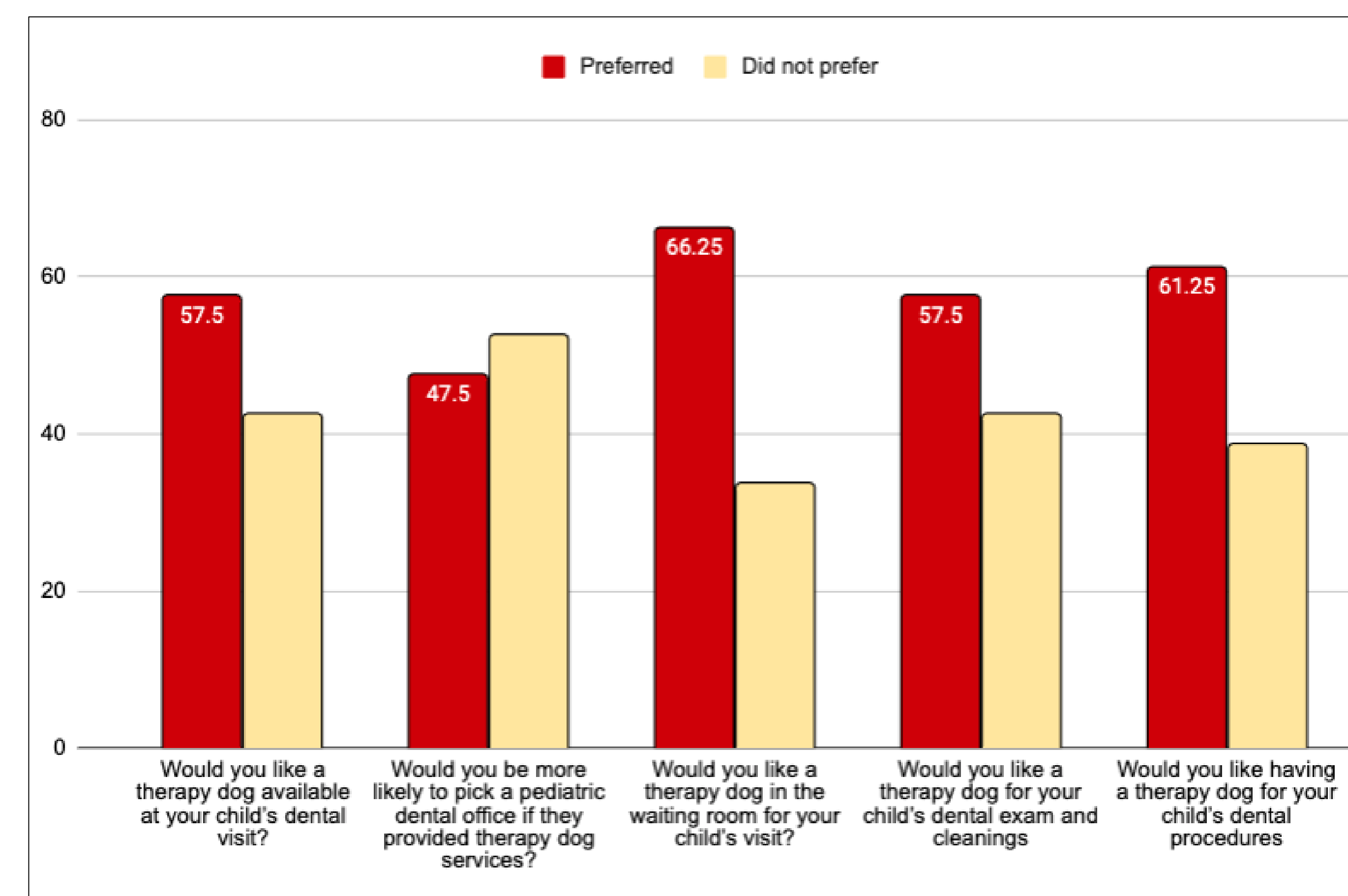
A total of 80 parents or legal guardians were surveyed who met the inclusion criteria. Most surveyed parents were mothers (86.25%) of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (77.5%), and high school graduates (51.25%) (**Table 1**). The survey responses were based on children 1- to 14 years old, with a mean age of 7.31 years ( $\pm 3.37$  SD). Approximately 84% of the children did not have special needs (N = 67)(**Table 2**).

**Table 2:** Demographics of children and parents

Average age of child	7.31 yo	$\pm 3.37$ SD
Special needs	%	N
No	83.75	67
Yes	16.25	13
Parent or child has allergy to dog	%	N
No	92.5	74
Yes	7.5	6
Fear of dogs	%	N
Parent has fear of dogs	11.25	9
Child has fear of dogs	13.75	11

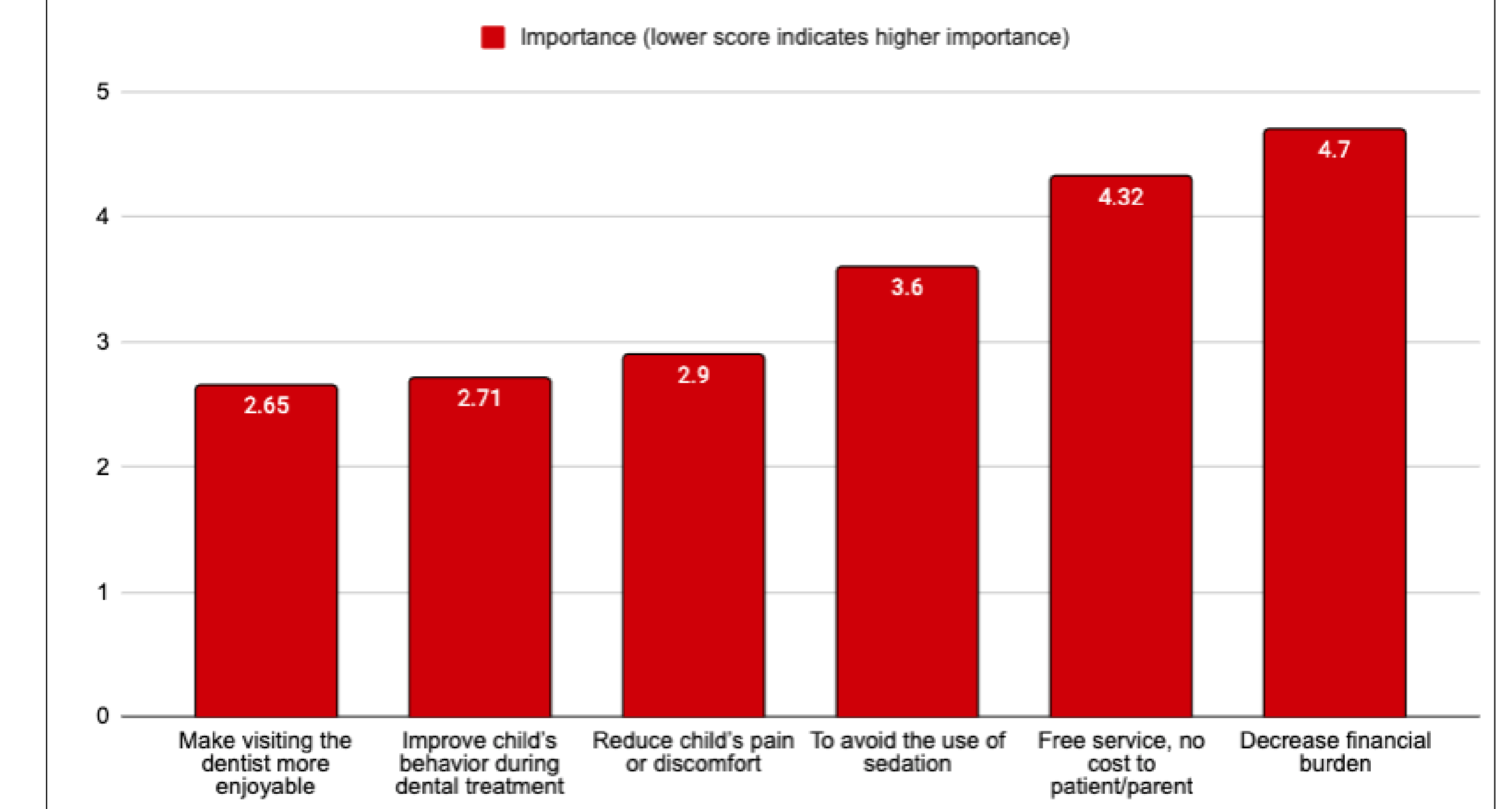
The percentage of parents that would like a therapy dog at their child's dental visit was recorded as a proportion with a preferred response (agree or strongly agree) and not preferred response (strongly disagree, disagree, or neutral) (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1:** Parental Preference

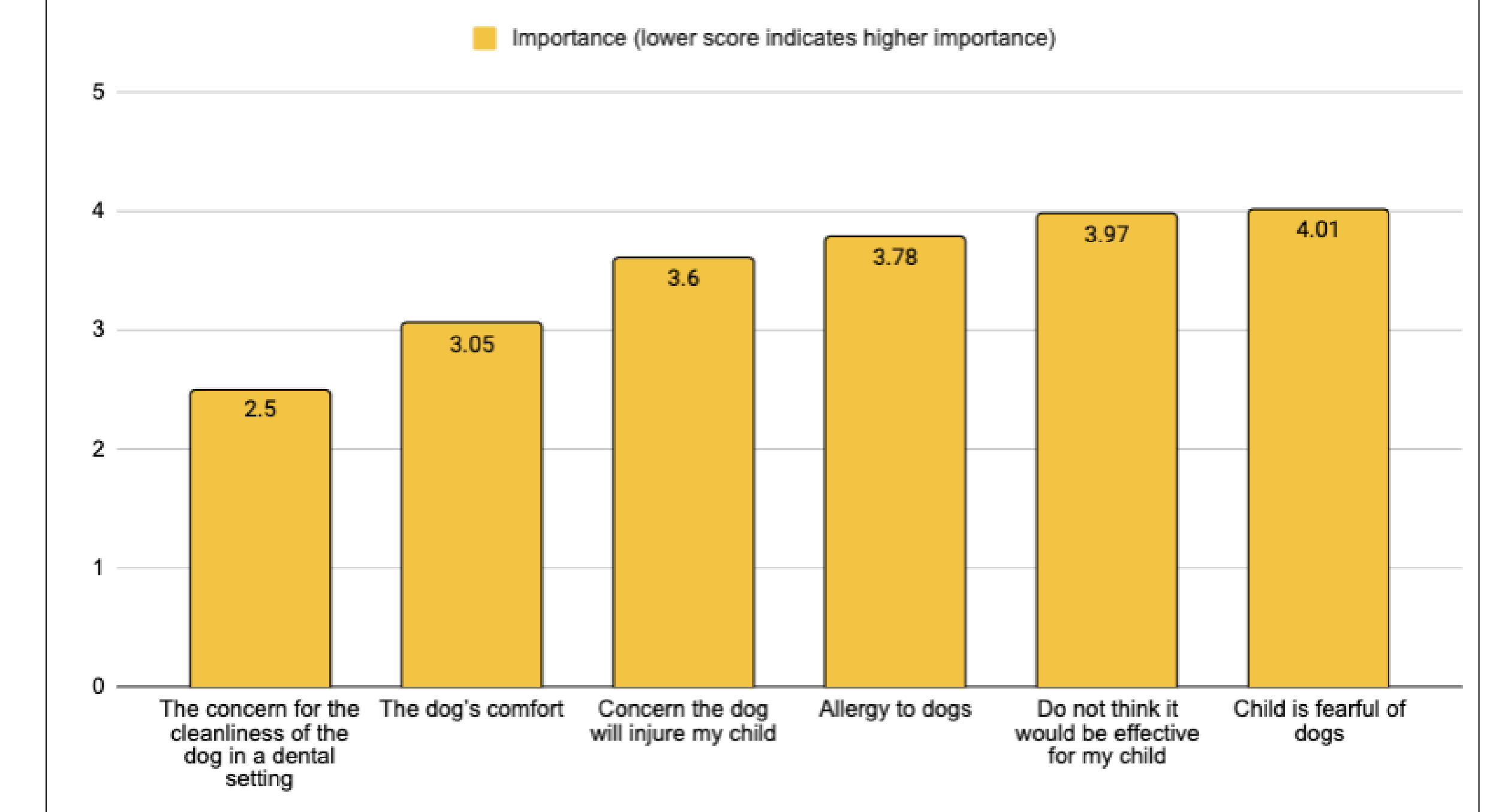


Parents were also asked to rank six statements to determine parental motivating factors for choosing a therapy dog (lower scores equate more importance). The most important factor for parents considering using a therapy dog for their child's dental treatment was to make the visit more enjoyable (**Figure 2**). Parents were asked to rank six statements to determine their concerns deterring them from the use of a therapy dog. The most important factors for parents considering why they would not want to use a therapy dog during their child's dental treatment were concern for cleanliness and the dog's comfort (**Figure 3**).

**Figure 2:** Most Important Motivating Factors



**Figure 3:** Most Important Concerns



## CONCLUSIONS

Parental responses show acceptability and demand for therapy dogs in the dental office setting among a predominantly Hispanic or Latino population. The most important parental motivating factors for choosing the use of a therapy dog were: to make visiting the dentist more enjoyable, improve child's behavior during dental treatment, and reduce child's pain or discomfort. The most important concerns deterring parents from the use of therapy dogs were: the concern for the cleanliness of the dog in a dental setting, the dog's comfort, and the concern the dog will injure their child.

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