



# One Big Happy Family

**Practice Growth Nearly 3X  
Other Alaska Dentists**

*By* DENISE PLOOF • PHOTOS *By* SHANNON MCGUIRE

Samantha Mize, DDS, and her husband, Josh, both work at Dr. Sam's practice called Bitesize Pediatric Dentistry in Anchorage, Alaska. In a recent dentist survey by Dental Practice Marketing and Management, only 23% of respondents said they thought husband and wife teams were a good idea. Dr. Sam and Josh seem to be bucking that trend.





## Children Have Always Been Her Passion

Dr. Sam grew up in Houston, Texas. She graduated from the University of Texas at Tyler and majored in biology with a minor in chemistry. She earned her DDS degree at Baylor College of Dentistry (now Texas A&M College of Dentistry). While in dental school, she began to think about pediatric dentistry since “children have always been my passion,” she says. She did a two-year residency in pediatric dentistry at the Medical University of South Carolina, graduating in 2018.

## Common Bond with Husband-To-Be

While in college, Dr. Sam met her husband-to-be Josh Mize while they were both doing volunteer work with children. After their wedding, Josh was a firefighter, then Realtor®, and stay-at-home dad for the first few years – until he got involved helping Dr. Sam open her own practice.

## Family of Four Packs Their Bags

After her residency, Dr. Sam and Josh moved across the country with their two young children. Dr. Sam took a position as an associate

for a pediatric dentist in Soldotna, Alaska. Within a year, it was clear the doctor didn’t have enough patients to warrant an associate. She then decided to move to Anchorage and open her own practice. She worked part-time at a practice in Wasilla while building up her start-up practice in Anchorage.

## Building a Kid-Friendly Practice

Dr. Sam and Josh did a lot of planning to build the new practice. They moved into an existing office that felt very cold and medical. They gutted the office and designed the new interior to be more kid-friendly. By this time, Josh had gained dentistry knowledge “through osmosis” by being married to Dr. Sam and helping to build the new practice. Dr. Sam decided to bring him on as office manager.

Bitesize Pediatric Dentistry opened in October of 2019, and COVID-19 hit hard about six months later. “Treat every patient as if he/she were our own child” became the practice mantra.



## Practice Stats

**DENTISTS** 1

**STAFF** 8

**ACTIVE PATIENTS** 1,069

**FOCUS/SPECIALTY**  
Pediatric Dentistry

**SERVICES**  
Cleanings, Digital X-rays,  
Fillings, Sealants, Crowns,  
Sedation Dentistry

**PRACTICE SIZE**  
2,400 Square Feet

**OPERATORIES** 5

**MISSION**  
To serve the dental needs of  
infants, children, teens, and those  
with special needs in Alaska.

*Practice Philosophy*  
Treat every patient as if  
he/she were our own child.

## While Some Practices Have Struggled, Bitesize Nearly Triples

“The COVID-19 pandemic has had an adverse impact on high-contact industries, including dentistry,” notes the American Dental Association. While a number of dental offices have struggled or closed, Bitesize has seen a significant increase in new patients – including exceptional growth in the last several months.

New patients are how you grow, says Josh. “When we first started, we might get 20 new patients in a month,” he says.

“Now, the average number of monthly new patients in pediatric dental offices in Alaska is 40 per doctor. During July, we had 110 new patients, and we have averaged that the last three to four months,” he says.

## Reasons for Growth Since COVID

Dr. Sam and Josh suspect several things have contributed to their growth including continued marketing during COVID, treating military families well, traveling to remote villages to treat kids, taking care of special

**LEFT** The colors – bright and playful – emphasized in the Bitesize Pediatric Logo, are carried throughout the practice. The upholstery on the operator chairs continue the bright, child-friendly theme. **RIGHT** The warm wood colors paired with the pops of bright blue and orange on the hygiene and doctor chairs pull the welcoming environment throughout the space. The walls display art pieces of local wildlife painted by local artists.



needs patients, and doing their best to make kids comfortable during their appointments.

## 1 Not Pulling the Plug on Marketing During COVID

“After evaluating our practice a year after COVID first hit, it seems to have somehow helped us grab some market share,” says Josh. “I attribute some of that growth to continuing to market (cheaply) instead of completely pulling the plug on all expenditures,” he says. “Our Facebook and Google ads and posts seem all the more prominent.”

## 2 Taking Good Care of Military Families

Dr. Sam attributes some of their growth to the fact that they have a lot of military families (from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson) as patients, and “we treat them well,” she says. “It’s a big base, and people there hear about us through word of mouth.”

## 3 Going the Extra Mile Traveling to Remote Villages

Another thing she attributes to the practice’s growth is she has traveled to several isolated villages to take care of kids’ dental needs as in many villages are no pediatric dentists. “By going to the villages, we get referrals from general dentists who are out there,” she says. “It’s also made a reputation for Sam – that she’s willing to go the extra mile to take care of all children,” adds Josh.

## 4 Taking Care of Special Needs Kids

Not all practices have the interest or training to take care of special needs kids. Bitesize provides top-notch dental care to patients with special healthcare needs, behavior disorders, mental disabilities, and physical disabilities. Dr. Sam received extensive training for patients with special healthcare needs. “She really has a soft spot in her heart for special needs kids,” says Josh. “And she’s really, really good with kids.”

## 5 Serving the Kids Better

Dr. Sam does her best to make kids comfortable. “I am pretty particular about the materials I use. I use a strong topical (bubble gum flavored) gel prior to a local anesthetic injection to make it so kids don’t feel the initial poke,” she says. “I also buffer my local anesthetic, so it takes effect immediately. I can then start a filling right away. Typically, dentists give a local and then leave while it takes effect – which can lead to kids losing interest and misbehaving during treatment. Once I sit down to start the treatment, I don’t leave. This is helpful since kids have short attention spans and can easily become restless,” she says. “All of this lets me serve the kids better.”

## Growth Leads to Planning for Nearly Two Times the Space

After a year, Bitesize had outgrown its 1,800 SF office. The practice includes four operatories and is building out a fifth. With over a thousand patients, they are adding 1,600 SF on a second floor.

Burkhart’s Account Manager Arnie Valdez and Equipment Specialist Louis Ullrich supported Bitesize Dentistry during the initial office planning and building. “Louis worked with me for the build-out, and now he’s helping me with a second office going in,” says Dr. Sam. “He was very helpful with our equipment selection process. “He knew different brands and options and gave us choices so we could decide what would work best for us,” she says. Josh adds, “Louis and Arne are the salt of the earth. We have a very good relationship with them.”

## Other Strategies That May Have Contributed to Growth

A number of other things Bitesize does may also have contributed to their growth: having a unique, kid-friendly environment, giving prizes and squishy balls to kids to reduce anxiety and make going to the dentist fun, spending extra



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**TOP** From left to right, Josh Mize, Dr. Sam, and Arnie Valdez, Burkhart Account Manager. **BELOW** With an eye to short attention spans, the welcoming area has an iPad and Nintendo Switch station and a play kitchen. Even a toy train runs around the ceiling on a track Josh built.





time with parents, and not overbooking so that families rarely wait long for the appointments.

### Unique, Kid-Friendly Environment

Families are greeted with a kid-friendly environment designed to make children comfortable. To make the office kid-friendly, Dr. Sam and Josh decorated with vibrant wildlife art pieces from local artists, built an iPad and Nintendo Switch™ station, added a play kitchen, and Josh built a train that goes around the ceiling. He also built a prize wall with 16 sections filled with fun prizes for kids.

### Have You Tried Prizes & Squishy Balls to Decrease Anxiety?

Even if you only treat adults, you might try investing in prizes or the wildly popular squishy balls Dr. Sam incorporated into her practice. The toys not only help provide a clinic environment that makes it fun for kids of all ages but help decrease their anxiety about coming to the dentist's office. If the kids have a regular cleaning, they select a special prize (or

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*Dr. Sam*

sometimes two) to take home.

If they need a procedure, they get to play with a coveted squishy ball and take it home. Squishy balls and noise-canceling headphones connected to TVs distract the kids, especially when they need fillings or crowns. “Not only do the young kids have fun with the squishy balls, but teenagers really love them too,” she says.

### Exceptional Experience for Parents

Dr. Sam explains several things she does to make the dental experience better for parents as well as kids. “I use a variety of techniques to make the

appointments more efficient, but also make sure to spend extra time with parents going over oral hygiene instructions,” she says.

### What's a Pet Peeve for Many Adults?

Waiting to see your doctor, hairdresser, cable tv repair person, pet groomer, banker, accountant, or dentist can be a pet peeve for many. At Bitesize, the staff doesn't overbook patients. The practice uses specific scheduling procedures

customized for the needs of every patient. “We really try not to let families wait for a long time. And it's rare that we run behind,” she says.

### A Family That Works Together Stays Together

When asked about what it's like to have a husband and wife team in the office, Dr. Sam says, “No one cares about your office or business more than family. When you have someone passionate about it – I think it's infectious. You have a leader in front and in back – and I think that helps,” she says. “It's also cool for our own kids to see their parents go

to work together. It's truly a family business.”

Any challenges? “The biggest challenge for us is not talking about work when we go home. It's a benefit too – it helps with our efficiency,” she adds.

In the true family spirit, Dr. Sam is expecting their third child in December. She's excited about the addition to the family and is looking forward to their new office expansion. “It will be easier to bring the baby to work,” she says. •

**FAR LEFT** Decreasing anxiety is at the heart of many aspects of the practice – like this squishable, grinning plush shark. **LEFT** The prize wall, built by Josh, offers 16 cubbies filled to the brim with fun prize selections for kids to take home after their appointments.

## Success Through Differentiation

### FOR KIDS

- Welcoming and kid-friendly environment
- Providing quality, affordable care
- Providing innovative techniques and treatments
- Helping kids feel safe and secure with toys & distractions
- Using techniques to relieve anxiety and reduce pain
- Customizing everything based on child's developmental level
- Providing care for special needs kids

### FOR PARENTS

- Using systems to decrease family wait times
- Spending more time with parents and kids
- Providing exceptional service
- Having talented and empathetic staff
- Using techniques to make appointments more efficient
- Spending extra time for oral hygiene instructions
- Answering emergency phone line herself (Dr. Sam)