

RELAXING CHILD PATIENTS

Roger Matthews, chief dental advisor at Denplan discusses why making children feel at home in the dentist's chair is vitally important for your practice and ensuring the successful future of your business.

We all know that children's oral health care is vitally important. I am sure you have all heard the shocking research statistics which discovered that 38% of five-year-olds in England have decayed, missing or filled teeth and that around 30,000 children are admitted to hospital for tooth decay and extraction each year (1). However, for many child patients going to the dentist can be a daunting experience. So how can you ensure that your child patients, and their parents, feel at ease and encourage preventive care in the future?

Child patients respond well to kind, sympathetic care and will enjoy being given the opportunity to learn about their oral health. Often, however, the fears and anxieties of parents will transfer onto their children, making the dentist's seem like a scary place. Giving children and their parents the time they need to ask questions and feel relaxed and comfortable is essential in order to ensure a lifetime of preventive care.

There are a number of ways that dentists can help make their child patients more relaxed and the tips below are designed to help you:

Pre-preparation

It is vitally important that dentists inform parents of what is going to happen when their child has their appointment, as it is the parent that will explain this to the child. This will also allow the parent to ask any questions and allay their own fears, so they don't pass their anxiety onto their children. Some practices find it useful to have information leaflets on bringing children into the practice and what to expect. It is also important that dentists encourage parents to bring their children to the surgery at a young age so they get used to the sights and sounds. Making this a routine as soon as milk teeth develop is a great way of encouraging a lifetime of preventive care.

Involve children in any way you can

One of the most important things to avoid is talking over the child, directly to their parent. This only makes the child feel excluded and can often increase their anxiety. Children not only like to feel involved and special but they also love to learn and see new things. A great way of doing this is to show them any of their x-rays and to explain any procedures.

Similarly, make sure your practice staff feel at ease with children and that they make your child patients feel welcome when they visit. If the child associates going to the dentist with all the nice people they meet, they will be far more likely to want to come again.

Let parents and children have their check-ups at the same time

Many parents already do a good job of keeping their children calm when visiting the dentist; one way that dentists have found to be effective is to allow parents and children to have their appointments at the same time. Rather than simply being in the room, if a child can see their parent having their check-up and that there is nothing to fear, they are more likely to be 'grown-up' and more calm and relaxed as a result. It is important, however, to remind parents that they should be a passive observer only and not to interfere with the dentist's work.

Distraction is key

If you don't have enough space for a play area for your children, simply provide appropriate books and puzzles to help keep them occupied while they wait. Some practices go one step further and have a dedicated waiting room for their younger patients, complete with CDs, DVDs and games consoles!

Other solutions that child-patients have responded well to in the past include playing music, or putting interesting posters on the ceiling above the dentist's chair. This not only keeps them still and in a good position for their check-up, but can also occupy their attention where more complex work is required. I even know of a dentist who stuck an entire electric car-track on the ceiling and changed the cars around every few months to keep the children's interest!

However, if you have particularly nervous or badly behaved patients then Relaxive Analgesia is always an option, but this is often not necessary if these methods are followed.

Modernise established ideas

The established methods of rewarding children, such as with stickers, can seem old-fashioned but they still really encourage young patients to behave.

Dr Angharad Rudkin, chartered clinical child psychologist says: “Children seek praise and positive feedback from adults in order to develop and build up their self-esteem. They can receive this in two main ways; through look, touch and speech; and through objects. Objects can become powerful “reinforcers” of behaviour (i.e. make it more likely that the child will do that behaviour again) if they are accompanied by look, touch and speech. That is why stickers - for all their simplicity - when given to a child with a big smile, a pat on the head and verbal praise, helps the child feel good about themselves and about the situation. When we feel good, we are more likely to behave in that way again.”

Stickers are still a good reward, but it is important to remember never to use them as a bribe. Rather than saying “if you behave well, you will get a sticker”, wait until the end of the appointment and say “because you were so good, I am going to give you a sticker”. Even if a child is particularly difficult there should always be one thing you can reward them for, even if it is just getting into the chair, and this will encourage them to be better on the next visit. However, try not to order the same stickers all the time, as children soon get bored.

Some payment plan providers offer specially designed stickers, merchandise and even activity sheets to member practices who are dedicated to offering the best care for their child patients. These providers can also offer a range of tailor-made training days, which can include modules on communicating with younger patients and can count towards Continuing Professional Development (CPD) when undertaken in accordance with GDC requirements.

Let patients know that they are valued

Patients are far more likely to stay loyal to your practice and attend regular check-ups if they know both they and their children are well looked after. They might also be more inclined to buy additional products or services from you if they know they can trust your skill and judgement. Offering great care for children is a powerful way of making your practice stand out from competitors' and could even attract new patients, as a word-of-mouth recommendation carries much more weight than any advert could. Using these tips, dentists can start getting back to the days where patients stayed loyal to their surgery from birth until old-age.

(1) British Association for Community Dentistry (BASCD) survey of five-year olds in 2005

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