

Create a Positive First Impression and Build Your Success with Parents

Imagine yourself as a parent taking your child for their first visit to a pediatric dental practice. The office sign is mostly blocked by overgrown foliage. A harried receptionist cannot find the required HIPPA forms. The overcrowded reception area is strewn with torn books. Feeling confident of having chosen the right practice for your child?

Let's try again. The office is clearly marked with a well-kept sign. Parking is nearby, ample and free. The receptionist smiles at you and greets your child by name. The reception area offers comfortable seating for children and adults. It is not quiet, but reasonably clean and stocked with toys for children of all ages.

No doubt both of these practices offer excellent pediatric dental care by doctors who know and love children. Yet the first impression from each practice is very different. Most parents would decide that the second practice has the better pediatric dentist.

The initial experiences of patients and parents in the reception area are essential to the success of your pediatric dental practice. Fairly or unfairly, parents make snap judgments about their health care providers. Their impression of your practice may be created almost instantly. In fact, research suggests that people decide whether they want to establish a relationship with another person (or a practice) in the first four minutes of contact.¹

Not only do people form first impressions quickly, but they hold fast to those impressions, often in spite of evidence to the contrary. Additional information about another person is forced to fit the initial judgment.² In effect, parents make up their minds about your office and do not want to be proven wrong. The tone of an entire visit can be determined by the first few moments in your practice.

Office Signage: Getting Positive Attention

Take a walk out to the front of your building and look carefully at your office sign. The following checklist will help ensure that it has the desired influence on parents and the community.

- The sign is in impeccable condition—free of peeling paint, missing letters and overgrown plants or bushes.
- If you have road traffic, the pediatric dental practice name (or your name) is large enough to be easily read from passing cars.
- If you have two-way traffic, the sign can be read from both directions. (The best choice for two-way traffic is a two-sided sign hanging perpendicular to the building, rather than a one-sided sign mounted directly to the building wall.)
- The sign blends well with the style of your building.
- The sign is well suited to the style of your neighborhood and in keeping with local ordinances regarding size, height and setback from the street.
- The sign designates your specialty status or otherwise communicates that your office provides dentistry especially for children.
- Optional: The sign includes the practice phone number.
- Optional: The sign features your practice logo or a kid-friendly graphic element.
- Optional: The sign lists your office hours.

Practice Facility: Building Satisfaction for Patients and Parents

Invite your team to join you on a tour of your office facility. Working together, you can evaluate its effectiveness in presenting a positive image of your practice and creating an atmosphere where both patients and parents feel comfortable. Use the following checklists as your guide.

Office Entrance

- The parking areas, office grounds and building lobby are well maintained.
- Your pediatric dental office entrance is clearly marked.
- The office entrance has a boot mat and ample space for coats, umbrellas, strollers and other patient belongings.

Reception Area

- The reception area has comfortable seating for parents and patients of various age groups.
- The reception furniture is easily cleaned and in good repair.

- The reception area has good lighting for reading and filling out forms.
- The play area is stocked with interesting books and toys for patients of all ages.
- The reception desk is of ample size to accommodate the number of office staff, as well as the number of parents typically at the desk.
- The framed diplomas and professional certificates of the doctor and staff are current and in good condition.
- The reception area contains a suggestion box and/or feedback forms.
- The pictures, posters and other artwork are appealing to both children and adults.
- You offer patient education materials on a variety of pediatric dental topics. The booklets are displayed neatly in a rack, not stacked haphazardly on a corner of the business desk.
- You offer current reading material for parents, arranged neatly in a rack.
- You provide local daily and community weekly news papers.
- You have a scrapbook of pictures and thank-you letters from patients.
- My clothing is pressed, cleaned and repaired—no stains, missing buttons or sagging hemlines.
- I avoid clothes that are overly fussy, too tight or do not stay in place.
- I save outfits showing cleavage, midriff or too much thigh for my social life.
- I keep my nails at a standard length. (Polish in standard colors, unusual nail polish or no polish at all is fine, as long as the nails are not overly long.)
- My shoes are well maintained and comfortable.
- I usually wear at least one child-friendly item such as a cool pin, bright scarf, or sweater or blouse tying in with the season.

Parent Contact: Creating Quick Rapport

Rapport is creating a positive first impression of liking and trust through one-on-one personal contact. If parents feel comfortable with your front desk team, there will be a fullness of communication that will make it easier to provide dental care to their children. How does your reception staff create this rapport? Through both verbal and nonverbal skills in the first few moments of contact with parents. Pass the following tips along to your team to help them build parent rapport in the reception.

Before you meet a new patient, check the appointment schedule for the parent's and child's name. When the parent and child enter the office, come around the desk if possible. Greet both the parent and child by name. (Be sure to use surnames with parents until invited to do otherwise.) Naturally, you will ask a question or offer a compliment to the child. Then, make at least one personal remark to the parent before discussing dental information. You could use basic data from the initial appointment forms to ask an open question about work, children, community, or the source of the referral. For example, you might say, "I see Sara just started at Kingsley school. How does she like kindergarten?" Or, "I'll thank Mr. Closen for referring you to us. How did you happen to meet him?" You could offer a quick tour of the office. Introduce any staff members you pass, adding a compliment if possible. For example, you might say, "This is Mickey. She's an excellent hygienist and has been with our practice for 12 years."

The following tips will help you build rapport through nonverbal skills:

- Do:** Make strong, consistent eye contact
- Don't:** Look away frequently or focus entirely on the computer screen or patient forms

Additional Office Areas

- You provide a private area to discuss financial arrangements and other parent concerns.
- The hallways, laboratory and business areas are neat, clean and free from clutter.
- The restroom is clean, well stocked and clearly marked.

Business Staff: Dressing for Success and Comfort

The following guidelines will assist appointment coordinators, business managers and other front office professionals in presenting a professional appearance consistent with a quality pediatric dental practice.

- I have excellent dental health.
- My hair is clean and styled in a simple manner to stay off my face and out of my eyes.
- My glasses fit well. (They aren't crooked and don't constantly slide down my nose.)
- My make-up is subtle and enhances my natural appearance.
- I always wear a nametag.
- I wear comfortable business clothing, such as a pants suit, tailored dress, sweater and slacks, or a blazer worn over a blouse and skirt.

- Do:** Nod and smile as parent speaks
Don't: Have little change in facial expression or allow strong negative reactions to show
- Do:** Position yourself at an equal level with the parent
Don't: Stay seated while the parent stands at the desk
- Do:** Have a relaxed but erect posture
Don't: Slouch or hang on the counter
- Do:** Keep an open upper body position
Don't: Fold your arms, fidget, or needlessly shuffle papers

The tone of an entire appointment can be determined by the first few moments in your practice. Along with good signage and a comfortable facility, effective personal contact with your reception team will put parents in a positive frame of mind for the rest of their experiences in your practice. It will also help market the practice, increase treatment acceptance and promote a professional image of your pediatric dental services.

References

1. Zunin L, Zunin N. Contact: The first four minutes. New York: Ballantine Books; 1972.
2. Hastorf A, Schneider DJ, Ellsworth P. Person perception, Ed 2. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publications; 1979.

PMMNews

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING NEWS IN PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY

Published six times a year as a direct membership benefit by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, 211 E. Chicago Avenue—Suite 700, Chicago IL 60611–2663, (312) 337-2169. Copyright©2003 by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. All rights reserved. ISSN 1064-1203. aapdinfo@aapd.org, www.aapd.org

This publication is written by Ms. Robin Wright, president of Wright Communications, an international dental communication specialist, author, lecturer and consultant. Opinions and recommendations are those of the author and should not be considered AAPD policy.

Executive Director
Dr. John S. Rutkauskas

Communications Manager
Gina Sandoval

Publications and Layout Associate
Kristin McComas