

The tricks of the trade – engaging under-18s

How best to pitch your oral health education when it comes to your younger patients?

Communication is a key part of the skillset of any good dental professional – indeed, some might suggest that, for dental nurses, this is the area where they come into their own when it comes to engaging patients. Anecdotally, patients often view the dental nurse as a friendly face in the practice and it is to you whom they may turn, armed with their questions and concerns.

Essentially, tailoring communication is a necessity if the team is to succeed in conveying key oral health messages. But what of your younger patients and the wide spectrum of ages this covers – and how best to get them on side when it comes to the maintenance of good oral hygiene habits?

Sometimes, with the under 18s, it can feel as if someone is moving the goalposts. For those dental nurses newly qualified, arguably there is an advantage to being younger with perhaps a better understanding of this demographic and their lifestyle habits and choices. For the more experienced and mature dental nurses, who may have children still under 18, the communication will be built on years of engaging their own offspring. But every child is different with different needs and varying abilities to not only understand the importance of toothbrushing and interdental cleaning and so on, but also arrive in the chair with different attitudes attached to its importance and different dexterity skills to apply this understanding in a practical way. Additionally, for some, there may be a fear factor, which may not necessarily be vocalised.

University challenges

For the older child, off to university, there can be a small window of opportunity to get across the message of good oral hygiene before their desire to keep regular appointments tails off in the interim period between school and work. It can be the price tag – under 18s can get free NHS dental care (or under 19s if in full-time education) but not beyond this.

In one thread on the student



discussion forum website, thestudentroom.co.uk, one student protests: 'I have to pay for my dental treatment, including check ups and I'm 18. Cost me bloomin' £30! My boyfriend gets it free though because he's from a low-income family. I'm pretty sure you have to pay if you're a student. too.'

With reports that pre-drinks and games commence in the early evening for students, they may also skip meals due to not having the time. Instead of taking into account the damage this is causing, it's merely seen as an 'easier and quicker way' to feel the effects of alcohol. An indication perhaps of what takes priority for some.

Each child is different

Sometimes it can be difficult to decipher where childhood ends and the teenage years begins – and this may vary from child to child and definitely does not always happen at 13!

Maturity happens at different speeds, trends change rapidly and what was cool last month is no longer. Therefore, all your efforts to focus on anything to pique interest

with children in order to engage with them seemingly shifts continually and those superhero stickers you have tucked away in a drawer as rewards no longer quite have the appeal they once did.

Faye Greenhalgh is a dental nurse and project development manager with dentist Ben Atkins, clinical director of Revive Dental Care in Manchester and a Trustee of the Oral Health Foundation.

She says: 'I find younger patients respond best if you interact with them. Each child is different. On arrival, you must assess if the patient is a talker, a listener or a doer. Once you know this, you can then adapt how you will engage with them to make the dental experience a positive one.'

She says: 'As part of my role with Revive Dental Care, I attend primary schools to give oral health talks. This includes a small presentation, pupil participation and each pupil receives a goody bag. This helps make their trip to the dentist more pleasurable as they are meeting in a non-clinical environment first.'

Adrian Garner is Revive Dental Care's

Top tips to a perfect engagement

Smile. Give a warm welcoming and tell the patient your first name. Compliment the patient. Find something they can talk to you about. It may be their watch, shoes, glasses and so on.

Be enthusiastic. Make it in to a game, or you can get the patient involved by asking them to have important job for you such as holding the mirror.

Stick to your word! Trust is a big thing so it is important not to lie to the patient if they ask 'will it hurt?'. You can reply by saying 'it might be a little uncomfortable'.

Speak to the child not just the adult. Make eye contact with the patient and get down to their level.



EDDN and focused on the prototype pathway. He says that five ways he interacts with children are:

- Getting the patient involved, using demonstrations such as tooth brushing and disclosing
- Talking in a language the patient understands, not using jargon!
- Making the appointment fun and giving them rewards such as stickers
- Giving the children something to take home and bring back, e.g. brushing charts
- Asking the patient what they remember from the oral health video they watch before attending the appointment.

Like many dentists, Ben Atkins has helped a lot of patients master the challenges of cleaning their teeth to ensure they keep their smiles bright and healthy. The secret of success is, of course, to cover the whole mouth, getting in between those awkward gaps between teeth and covering all five surfaces of each and every tooth. But, occasionally, younger patients (like adults)

may struggle with commitment to regular oral health routines, may even skip the recommended two minutes twice a day and, as a consequence, risk doing untold damage to the health of their mouths thanks largely to unintentional neglect. They may also brush too hard, causing erosion to teeth – or not quite reach between all our teeth and so, sometimes it may be a simple case of tweaking poor technique to make a positive difference to their long-term (dental) health.

Fun and interactive

In Britain, children under the age of three spend an average of 44 minutes a day using smartphones and tablets and, whilst it is recommended that parents limit time spent on handheld gadgets, there is a place for positive application of technology that can encourage engagement and prove to be a positive learning tool in a modern world – and teeth cleaning is no exception.

The Philips Sonicare For Kids

rechargeable toothbrush is equipped with Bluetooth wireless technology and can be a fun, interactive coaching app that helps motivate kids ages three and up to learn to brush their teeth effectively.

Bluetooth wireless technology connects the Philips Sonicare For Kids power toothbrush directly to its customisable FREE coaching app, which helps kids develop good oral care habits with the help of their personal brushing coach 'Sparkly' who teaches proper brushing techniques and rewards kids for doing a thorough job each time they brush. Fun, educational games encourage kids to brush longer each time, building up to the dental professional-recommended two minutes, while getting them excited about the daily activity. In addition, a separate dashboard in the app allows parents to monitor their child's performance and progress as well as set up custom milestones and incentives to keep them motivated.

Sugary food and sweet packets should carry warnings

Doctors are calling for cigarette-style health warnings on the packaging of sugary foods that are aimed at children to curb the high number of children's teeth being extracted in hospitals around England.

They back the calls for sweet packets to come with traffic light-style warnings in an effort to combat dental and related health problems in children.

At their annual conference in Bournemouth, members of the British Medical Association (BMA) voted in favour of the new measures amid concerns about poor dental health among young people.

The BMA is also calling on the Department of Health to introduce compulsory dental hygiene lessons in primary schools.

It hopes that this, combined with the introduction of a sugar tax, will help to reduce the number of extractions taking place in primary school children.

A recent study has shown children who require extractions under general anaesthetic miss five days from school, totalling 1,510 missed schooldays in 2014/15.

The BMA is also calling for the restriction of unhealthy food and drinks sales on NHS premises, as well as calling for a tax on sweet bags and a ban on the advertising of high sugar drinks on TV before the watershed.

Government should also provide free toothbrushes to every child aged five and under in a bid to grapple a dental 'crisis' among toddlers, they say.

