

Wednesday, Oct 25, 5:18 AM

Fwd: Success in Pediatric Oral Health Care

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October 2017

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Pediatric Oral Health Care Grows into Success

Pediatric dentistry is where the seeds of optimal oral health are planted. In recent years, the provision of pediatric dental care has been steadily growing, but working with children can be challenging. The president of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) explains the phenomena driving growth in this area, and offers tips for optimizing care that is effective in the office and beyond.

James D. Nickman, DDS, president of the AAPD, describes the past few years as “exciting times” for pediatric dentistry. He sees growth in the profession, with the number of practitioners training to treat this population increasing each year. He characterizes pediatric practitioners as a young and diverse population. “Among our

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membership, 57% are younger than 50, and 51% are women,” Nickman says.

Demand for pediatric dental care, Nickman believes, is driven by parents seeking the best treatment for their children. He adds that some of the demand originates from families gaining access to dental insurance—“which government statistics seem to bear out. For example, the latest data from one study that included children up to age 18 showed that during a 12-month period, low-income children covered by Medicaid had dental visits at a rate nearly equivalent to children with private insurance coverage.¹

The same study revealed that between 2007 and 2013, the number of children enrolled in Medicaid or the state Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) increased more than 11%.¹ According to Nickman, 70% of pediatric dental practices accept patients from public health insurance programs. Furthermore, he notes, more than half of pediatric dental practices are accepting new patients from those same programs.

Products Help Fuel Growth

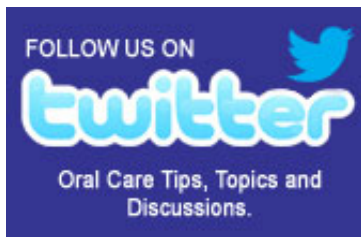
One of the defining characteristics of pediatric care, according to Nickman, is that it advocates prevention. Fluoride remains key to caries-prevention efforts, and products, such as professionally applied fluoride varnish, have increased patient compliance. Likewise, Nickman adds, silver diamine fluoride is helpful in treating infants and younger children because it allows oral health professionals to medically manage the disease until the children are better able to tolerate treatment.

Advancements in restorative materials have improved the esthetics of treatment among children. The use of laser technology to treat caries, remove bone, or treat hard and soft tissue is also growing among pediatric dental practices, with such benefits reported as reductions in post-operative infection, reduced anxiety for patients due to decreased noise level, and less need for anesthesia.²

Oral hygiene aids designed to appeal to children help boost compliance with self-care regimens. The dental market has developed a variety of products such as manual toothbrushes designed with kid-friendly motifs that include bright colors and patterns, and friendly monster characters for ages 2 and older. Power toothbrushes shaped like crayons or that feature popular cartoon characters are available and can help make brushing more appealing. Toothpastes, too, have been tailored to the pediatric population, and include fun flavors.

Oral Health Literacy

In many cases, children depend on a parent or caregiver to provide self-care or “in the case of older children” guide and monitor oral hygiene regimens. Several important tips can help clinicians ensure their care instructions are not lost in translation. Chief among



those tips, Nickman says, is to keep those instructions simple.

“We should develop care plans that help families integrate oral health in manageable bites, and build upon successes,” Nickman explains. He points out the challenge may sometimes be the diverse nature of the patient population, which ranges from college-educated dual income families to new immigrants with little oral health literacy and minimal dental care experience.

“While we would love to have families absorb all our wisdom in one visit, it takes time to create significant change,” Nickman says. He adds that care plans should be developed and discussed in a culturally appropriate manner whenever possible.

Safe Practice Above All

Caring for children comes with its own set of challenges, and yet treating young patients can be a highly rewarding part of practice, according to Nickman. He points out that sometimes the greatest difficulty in meeting the needs of pediatric patients is in creating a plan that meets the child’s needs, as well as the parent or caregiver’s desire for safe and effective treatment. Part of making that treatment optimal, he says, is for practitioners to spend the time necessary to communicate the needs of the child and options for treatment in understandable language. Nickman emphasizes that the practitioner should not only closely consider all the materials to be used in treatment, but also the most appropriate setting for the treatment to occur. “Patient safety should be paramount in all that we do,” Nickman says.

Children and their parents may historically have dreaded visiting the dental office, but advances in products and practice methods are overcoming the barriers that once separated young children from vital treatment. The path forward for pediatric oral health care is arcing upward, and dental hygienists will be essential in helping practices meet the demands of the influx of young patients and their families. Despite the challenges this trend will present, it provides an opportunity for the dental hygiene profession to showcase its strengths and lead generations of patients on the path to optimal oral health.

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