

Persuasive Case Presentations: Helping Parents Say Yes to Treatment

Do you wish parents would say “Yes, Doctor” at the end of every case presentation? Unfortunately, some parents do not accept treatment, and as a result their children suffer. On average, four out of ten patients fail to do what their doctors recommend.¹ If your case acceptance rate is above 60 percent, you are ahead of the game.

Without a doubt, treatment acceptance is good for parents and patients. When parents follow through on your recommendations, their children eat, talk and smile better. Treatment can even save lives. Case acceptance is also good for your practice. When parents agree to treatment, your practice receives the benefits of productivity, profit and professional satisfaction. This issue of *PMM* offers practical tips for bringing parents to saying “yes” in case presentations.

Setting the Stage for Treatment Acceptance

A parent may enter a case presentation asking, “Does the doctor really know my child?” Naturally, you are fully aware of the child’s unique dental situation, and your team is carefully organized. The key is *demonstrating* your preparedness from the parent’s point of view.

A team member should show the parent into the consultation area and possibly offer a cup of tea or soft drink. All of the visuals you plan to use (models, X-rays, intraoral camera photos) should be ready and waiting. The parent can peruse the visuals and support materials before you make your entrance.

When you enter the room, remember to call the parent by name. (And if the parent had to wait very long, be sure to apologize.) Begin the discussion with a compliment about the child, and at least one piece of good news about the child’s dental health. For example, “I always enjoy spending time with Jenny. She’s a delight. Based on her examination today, I can tell you that her teeth are developing normally, and in fact, she’s right on schedule in terms of her oral development.”

Next, preview your message. Sometimes parents cannot follow your case presentation because they do not have a mental model for it. Beginning with a brief outline of your discussion is one of the best ways to increase understanding on any health issue. For example, “First let’s discuss your

child’s dental conditions, then talk about the treatment needed to bring them back to comfort and good health.”

Being Clear When It’s Confusing

Explaining dental care to parents is not easy. The information is unfamiliar, the language difficult and concepts hard to picture. Health care research shows that patients fully understand what their doctors tell them only 15 percent of the time.² Further, patients are nearly unanimous in their dislike of dentists who start treatment without explanation.³ The following tips will help you present dental information in a manner parents can easily understand.

Organize your message around teeth, not around treatments. For example, do not say, “We will do X treatment on this tooth, this tooth and this tooth. We will do Y treatment here and here.” The parent may get confused when you jump from tooth to tooth in your discussion. Instead say, “Let’s talk about this tooth right here. It needs X and Y treatment. Now let’s talk about this tooth over here. It will require X and Z treatment.”

Focus on your main message. If you know your communication goals, you will be more likely to tell the important facts rather than wandering off on a related but irrelevant point.

Use short sentences and familiar words. Brief statements containing one idea are easier to understand than long, complex statements containing several ideas. Simple, familiar words will make your message memorable, as well as understandable. Plus, as a pediatric dentist, you build credibility by speaking in terms that children can understand.

Do not refer to teeth by numbers. This reference is lost on parents. Call teeth by name and location such as, “The very back molar on your right side.”

Tell a story. Examples make your explanation specific, interesting and memorable. If you tell a relevant story, you can demonstrate the effect of your information on the life and health of the child. Match your examples with the age and gender of the child when possible.

Highlight key points. Use your delivery style to make important messages stand out. Pause before and after crucial messages. State them slowly and forcefully, then resume a more relaxed style for background information.

Convincing Parents of Treatment Needs

You and the parent must agree on the nature of the dental problem before you can agree on a treatment plan. For example, if a parent thinks a cavity a year is normal for children, they will not be motivated to make changes in the child's diet and home care habits. If a parent is not convinced of the need for treatment during a discussion of their child's dental condition, they cannot be convinced to take action.

Essentially, parents listen to your explanations of dental conditions and ask themselves, "How bad is it?" "Must I take care of it right away or can it wait?" Parents decide for themselves about the severity of their child's dental conditions. If they judge the dental problems to be serious and immediate, they are more likely to listen to your treatment recommendations. Here are some tips for convincing parents of the need for treatment.

Prove the existence of the dental condition. Parents will accept your recommendation only if they believe their child actually has a dental problem. Make treatment needs observable to the parent by providing multiple signs of the dental condition if possible. X-rays, models and multimedia computer technology are not just tools for explanation, but tools for persuasion in terms of proving need for treatment. You might take the parent on a tour of the child's mouth and say, "See here? And see here? You can see for yourself that..."

Explain the relevance of any symptoms the child may have experienced. Some parents simply cannot tie children's dental symptoms to a dental problem on their own. If you make the link for them, they can recognize the relevance of their child's experiences, as well as proof of the existence of the dental condition. You might say, "You may have noticed (bleeding gums, sensitivity, eating difficulty, etc.) as symptoms of this condition."

Focus on health and lifestyle issues. Discuss the long-term effects of the dental problem and describe the impact of the problem on important aspects of the child's life. For example, "If we remove this tooth instead of fixing it, the teeth around it will shift out of position. This will affect not only the look of your child's smile, but also their ability to eat comfortably."

Explain why it is urgent. You may need to emphasize that the problem is particularly acute, requiring treatment immediately. Or, communicate that the dental situation is deteriorating and the time for action is limited.

Communicating the Value of Treatment

Parents hesitate to accept treatment because of the disadvantages involved—usually the time, inconvenience, discomfort or cost. You have four possible approaches for showing how the value of treatment outweighs the disadvantages.

Emphasize the benefits of treatment. To truly be persuasive, you must spell out the benefits of treatment and help parents imagine their children receiving the treatment benefits. Keep in mind that a benefit is not what the treatment is, but what the treatment does. The treatment is a description of the dental service; the benefit is what the service will mean to the child's quality of life. For example, parents do not buy composite fillings for their children, they buy protection of tooth structure, freedom from infection, a more attractive smile and future dental health.

Deal with the disadvantages. If the parent objects to the treatment for a specific reason, respond with how the disadvantage can be minimized. For example, "You're concerned about the visits disrupting your work schedule? Would it help if we scheduled your child's appointments in the early morning hours?" Or, "You're worried that it might be uncomfortable for your child? Here's how we can make the procedure as comfortable as possible."

Compare the disadvantages of treatment with the disadvantages of no treatment. If necessary, show parents that their child might face disadvantages far greater than those posed by the treatment. For example, "It sounds like taking care of these cavities will put a strain on your family budget. On the other hand, I worry about Jackie getting a toothache that will not only cause discomfort, but also keep her home from school. Would you like our financial administrator to talk with you about your insurance coverage and how you can best manage your out-of-pocket expenses for this?" Or, "I recognize that this treatment will put a squeeze on your already busy schedule. But without the treatment, you may find yourself in an emergency situation with Katie that will be inconvenient for both of you."

Emphasize the parent's personal power. Research demonstrates that a belief in one's own effectiveness is the most powerful predictor of behavior changes for a healthier lifestyle.⁴ A communication technique usually left out—and

one often essential to case acceptance—is helping parents recognize that they are capable of getting treatment for their children. For example, a parent who feels overwhelmed might be told, “As difficult as this situation is, a parent who is as dedicated as you are will find a way to help your child receive the treatment they really need.” You might mention other parents who faced the same dental problems with their children and were able to successfully find solutions. For example, “I had a family last year who found themselves in a similar situation. Although the treatment was extensive, they stayed with it and we were able to save their child’s smile.”

Two Final Tips

Quality dentistry comes to children only when the parents agree. You can increase your case acceptance rate, bring your patients the benefits of brighter smiles and better health, and your practice the benefits of effectiveness and efficiency. Here are two last tips for great case presentations.

Do not do all the talking. Dr. Omar Reed once noted that people buy not because they understand but because they feel understood. Health care research shows that the most important component of patient/parent satisfaction with your communication style is the ability to listen. Let parents tell their stories and give them a sense of involvement in their children’s care. Ask for parent questions—even if you are running late.

Put it in writing. A written treatment plan will increase your credibility and help parents remember your message after they get home. This will not only increase case acceptance, but also help decrease routine office phone calls.

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