

## **PRACTICE PROMOTION: ATTRACT NEW PATIENTS THROUGH LOW-COST, LOW-PRESSURE METHODS**

Where do your new patients come from? Although “Another planet!” might be your response on some days, you recognize that a strong, consistent referral base is essential to a healthy pediatric dental practice. Typically, about 75 percent of new pediatric dental patients come through referrals from current patient families, team members, community contacts and professional colleagues. Referrals are the most affordable, predictable and professional way to build a practice.

To take full advantage of this excellent promotional method, you must know where your referrals come from – and where the gaps are – so you can strengthen your referral base. The following questions will help you in your assessment.

- What percentage of parents actively refers to our practice?
- What percentage of parents do we ask for referrals?
- How often do parents leave the office with referral-friendly materials, such as a business card or practice brochure?
- How often do team members refer to our practice?
- How often do we receive referrals from the family, friends and other personal contacts of the pediatric dentist?
- What percentage of referrals comes from dental professional sources, such as general dentists or dental supply representatives?
- What percentage of referrals comes from non-dental professional sources, such as pediatricians, hospital personnel or teachers?
- How often do the pediatric dentist and team speak to local schools or community groups?
- How active are the pediatric dentist and team in community events?

To find solid answers to many of these questions, you must track your referral sources. During the first appointment phone call or at the first visit, the reception staff should ask parents of new patients, “Whom may we thank for referring you?” Another tracking method is to include the question, “How did you learn about our practice?” on new patient forms.

## **TEAM REFERRALS**

Each time your team members go out into the community, they have the opportunity to promote your pediatric dental practice and encourage referrals. Think of the potential patients they meet – at the grocery store, daycare center, health club, church or synagogue. When staff talk about the special care you give to children, the entire practice gains great promotional power. Here is how to support your team in encouraging referrals to your practice:

- Make sure every member of your team has his or her own business cards for the practice. The cards should feature the employee’s first and last name, any professional designation, position in the practice, as well as the office name, address, phone number and Web site or e-mail address.
- Encourage your team to carry their business cards everywhere and hand them out at every reasonable opportunity.
- Support your team’s involvement in the community. When they coach a soccer team, organize a school carnival, or play in a golf tournament, they make local contacts that broaden your referral base.
- Ask your team to take copies of parent education brochures (stamped with your practice name, address and phone number) when they visit their physicians, pediatricians, optometrists and pharmacists. The health care providers might be pleased to make the brochures available to interested patients.
- Reward your team for referrals. A private word of thanks and praise is good; public acknowledgement at a team meeting is better. (The best reward is cash in an envelope.)
- Be a great role model by doing these activities yourself. And never complain about the cost of ordering more cards and brochures.

## PARENT REFERRALS

To encourage referrals from parents of patients in the practice, you can:

- Post a sign in the reception area stating, “We welcome new patients,” or “We pride ourselves on our quality care and special attention to children. Please tell your friends about us.”
- Make sure every parent receives two or three business cards at least once a year.
- Offer parents a fresh copy of your practice brochure.
- Keep a supply of cards and practice brochures at the front desk.

When you receive a referral from a parent or patient, thank them in person and/or send a brief note of thanks from you or your office manager. The note might say, “A word of thanks for referring (patient’s name) to us. We will take excellent care of them. I appreciate the confidence you have shown in us.” Frequent referral sources deserve such gifts as balloon bouquets, fruit baskets or gift certificates from local bookstores or restaurants.

The winning strategy for encouraging referrals is to ASK parents for them during their children’s visits. Here are some examples:

- Most of our patients have been referred to us by their friends, family or neighbors. If you know of someone whose child would enjoy our practice, please refer them to us.
- Ricky had a great visit. If you happen to think of a child who would do as well with us as Ricky does, please feel free to tell his parents about us.
- I know it seems pretty busy here sometimes, but we always make room for the friends and families of our current patients. If you send someone our way, we will take good care of them.
- I wish we had more patients like your Jennifer. Don’t hesitate to pass our name along. Would you like a few of my business cards?
- Sara did so well today, and I remember you mentioning to me once that she had some difficulty tolerating other healthcare settings. We take extra care and time with our special needs patients. If you know someone who would benefit from the doctor’s expertise with special children, please encourage them to give us a call.

## PATIENT PROMOTION

You can increase referrals from current parents – and build patient loyalty – by creating office events to please your practice families. Here are possibilities for projects to improve your image with your current patient base:

- Track patient birthdays and send birthday cards.
- Upgrade your patient giveaways. In addition to the cool toothbrushes, floss and refrigerator magnets, consider t-shirts or frisbees with your logo on them.
- Send congratulation cards or flowers to parents and patients for weddings, the birth of a new baby, graduation from high school or college, or the receipt of a community award. Send get-well cards to patients in the hospital, and sympathy cards to families who lose a loved one. (Check your neighborhood paper as a source for this type of information.)
- Hold an open house to show off your new office, introduce new staff or celebrate your practice anniversary.
- Invite your patients to an annual summer picnic at a local park– or hold a winter party at a skating rink or community center.
- Since you see so many of your patients during the summer, give each of them a dental health travel kit for camp and vacations with a travel toothbrush, floss and fluoride toothpaste. Put a large map on your bulletin board and invite patients to mark where they will be traveling.
- Hold a contest. Your patients can color a picture you provide, create a poster or book cover, draw a cartoon, or write a dental-related story. Your team members can select the winners, or parents can vote for their favorites. Winning entries can be featured in your office, local paper, bulletin boards in schools, shopping centers or libraries.

## COMMUNITY PROMOTION

Here is a list of possible promotional programs that will increase the visibility of your practice to potential patients in your community.

### Health care Relations

- Mail articles or brochures to health professionals in your area on pediatric dental topics relevant to their practices. Consider pharmacists, plastic surgeons, pediatricians, optometrists, family practice physicians and osteopathic physicians.
- Naturally, you treat your referring health care colleagues to lunch on occasion, but you could also arrange for boxed lunches from a local caterer to your best professional referral sources and their support staffs.

- Volunteer for health fairs and dental health screening programs through the local medical society, dental society, health department, hospitals or community groups.

### School Contacts

- Offer a tour or “field trip” in your office to pre-schools and childcare programs. Or provide internships to high school students interested in careers in dentistry.
- Support school activities by advertising in their newspaper or yearbook, sponsoring a float, or contributing to a school fair.
- Donate pediatric dental health books to local schools and libraries. (Stamp your office name, address, phone number and e-mail address on the inside cover.)

### Sporting Events

- Sponsor a sports team. Put your office name on the uniforms and attend the games.
- Serve as a team dentist for a school sports team. Offer to provide complimentary or discounted mouthguards.
- Sponsor an entry in your local marathon, bicycle race or Special Olympics. You may get your name on a winning athlete’s t-shirt.
- Send a poster on managing dental emergencies to park districts, day camps, swimming pools and sports centers. Stamp your office address and phone number on the back or send along a few of your business cards.

### Print Possibilities

- Place an announcement about your new associate, practice location or team member in the community paper.

### Speaking Opportunities

- Research speaking opportunities with local groups interested in pediatric dentistry. Although you and your team no doubt visit grade schools during National Dental Health Month, you have many other possibilities.
- Address dental development, teething, pacifiers, and early preventive care to parenting groups, Lamaze classes, and infant care classes, through the health department or hospital.
- Speak to coaches on preventing and managing dental emergencies and the use of mouth guards.
- Opportunities with health professionals on topics ranging from dental development and oral cancer, to behavior management and the treatment of special needs children.

A strong base of consistent referrals will build your pediatric dental practice in a cost-effective and professional manner. Track your new patient referrals to discover your greatest areas of opportunity. Encourage team members to promote your practice to current patients and parents – and speak positively about your services throughout your community. Support this team effort with in-office projects and community programs for true marketing power that will increase the visibility of your practice.

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