

# A survey of dental office terminology in pediatric dental practice

Robert B. Berson, D.D.S.  
Daniel Brostoff, D.D.S., M.S.Ed.  
James T. Martinoff, M.Ed., M.A., Ph.D.

## Abstract

*Several researchers have emphasized the importance of communication in the development of positive non-threatening relationships with child dental patients. Euphemisms (mild expressions that substitute for words which may be offensive or suggest unpleasantness) are often used in pediatric dentistry to make a dental procedure more acceptable to a dental patient. Because the vocabulary of euphemistic language is endless and limited only by the imagination of the dental health team, an indication of the terminology that is currently in use by practicing pedodontists would be of interest to members of the profession. Data were obtained by a mailed survey from 963 members of the American Academy of Pedodontics who responded to a questionnaire. Data are presented which give word substitutes or phrases (euphemisms) that are used by members of the Academy to greet patients and describe dental office procedures, instruments, and equipment.*

## Introduction

There are some subtle, and yet important aspects of dental practice which help to guide children through their dental experiences successfully. It is generally agreed that if the dentist is to perform satisfactory dental care for child patients, the dentist must have their full cooperation and establish positive and non-threatening relationships. Chambers suggests that communication is the key to establishing this rapport with patients.<sup>1</sup>

Several dental researchers have emphasized that communication is multisensory.<sup>2-4</sup> While the most

common means of communication with children is through spoken language, communication is not limited to conversation alone. McDonald and Avery have demonstrated that posture and position of the dental team are important non-verbal signs of communication.<sup>5</sup> Elsbach has shown that stroking the hand of young children and smiles on the faces of the dentist and the dental assistants communicate feelings of warmth, approval and acceptance.<sup>6</sup> Moss has demonstrated that slow, smooth, purposeful movements of the dental team convey confidence and instill a feeling of security in patients.<sup>7</sup>

Other dental researchers have shown that when a clinician speaks to a child, special attention should be given to the tone of voice and modulation since they may express empathy and firmness.<sup>8-9</sup> Lenchner and Wright have shown that what is said and how it is said is very important as the child must be addressed at his level of comprehension.<sup>10</sup> These researchers do not imply using "baby-talk," but rather emphasizing words which have meaning for the patient:

... if a six-year-old patient functions at a three-year age level, then he must be addressed at that age level. Consequently, a six-year-old child who is advanced in his experiences and understanding cooperates more willingly when he is spoken to as if he were older. [Lenchner and Wright (1975)]

Finn has suggested that dentists do not talk to young children at their age levels.<sup>11</sup> He also reports that dentists often use vocabulary that is inappropriate which often elicits emotion-laden responses. Kozlov encourages dentists to avoid using words that might arouse fear in the child since many suggestive fears are not of the procedure itself, but rather of the fear producing connotation of a word.<sup>12</sup> Kozlov states:

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... some children may cringe in fear when the word "needle" is mentioned, yet object very little to the actual experience if another name is attached to the procedure. [Kozlov (1964)]

Kozlov cautions that deceptors should be avoided when working with children, but descriptive words without the connotation of pain should be used whenever possible. These euphemisms (mild expressions that substitute for words which may be offensive or suggest unpleasantness) often make a dental procedure more acceptable to a patient. Their use in dental practice should, as Lenchner and Wright suggest, be dictated by the age of the patient, and by the ability

of the dental team to use this vocabulary in a natural spontaneous manner.<sup>10</sup> Ginott calls this language "childrenese,"<sup>13</sup> and Kreinces suggests that this is "the second language of the pedodontist."<sup>14</sup> The vocabulary of this language is endless and is limited only by the imagination of the dental health care team.

The purpose of this study was to acquaint dental practitioners with the terminology that is most commonly encountered in pediatric dentistry. To accomplish this, a survey was conducted of members of the American Academy of Pedodontics to determine which words and phrases pedodontists use in establishing relationships with their patients. A total of 963 members responded to a mailed survey of 1,399 mem-

**Table 1. Greeting the new patient**

The question asked: How do you greet the patient? (that is when you as the pedodontist see the patient for the first time on the first visit).

Informal greeting (e.g., "Hi Mary") .....	30%
Formal greeting (e.g., "Good morning, Charlie") .....	21%
Greeting varies depending on the circumstances .....	29%
No greeting (e.g., "Is your name Tom?") .....	20%
Total =	100%

*Examples of the Kinds of Greetings Tallied  
Under Each of the Greeting Categories*

<i>Informal Greeting:</i>	<i>frequency</i>
Hi, how are you? .....	20
Hi, (name of patient). (Compliment, e.g., "It's good to see you") .....	14
Hi, (big boy, young lady, buddy, honey, etc.) .....	10
Hi, (informal conversation, e.g., "Have you ever been to a dentist?") .....	5
Hey, how are you? (Note this is the same as the first example) .....	5
Hi, I'm Dr. .... Are you .....? .....	4
Hi, how old are you? .....	2
Howdy (name of patient) .....	2
Total =	62
 <i>Formal Greeting:</i>	
Hello, (patient's name) .....	15
Hello .....	7
Hello, how are you? .....	4
Hello, I'm Dr. ....	4
Good morning. How are You? .....	4
Good morning .....	3
Hello (young man or young lady) .....	2
Hello (compliment, e.g., "It's nice to have you visit us") .....	2
Hello, what is your name? .....	1
Total =	43
 <i>No Greeting:</i>	
How are you? .....	22
(Give a compliment.) .....	14
Well, look who is here .....	3
Is your name .....? .....	2
Total =	41

**Table 2. Glossary of dental office terminology**

*Most Frequently Occurring Names Used For Operatory Equipment*

Operatory Equipment	Rank	Name	Frequency	Percentage	Operatory Equipment	Rank	Name	Frequency	Percentage	
CHAIR	1	Chair	319	46	X RAYS	1	Pictures	175	55	
	2	Special Chair	56	8		2	Pictures of Your Teeth	93	29	
	3	(color) Chair	47	7		3	Camera	10	3	
	4	Dental Chair	39	6		4	Special Pictures	9	3	
	5	Magic Chair	35	5		5	X Ray	8	3	
	6	My Chair	19	3		n=318	Other	23	7	
	7	Big Chair	18	3						
	8	Elevator Chair	16	2						
n=680		Other	131	20						
LIGHT	1	Light	323	50	ANESTHETIC	1	Sleepy Water	130	22	
	2	Flashlight	73	11		2	Sleepy Juice	122	21	
	3	Sunshine	55	9		3	Puts Your Tooth to Sleep	61	10	
	4	Special Light	25	4		4	Sleepy Medicine	29	5	
	5	Bright Light	24	4		5.5	Sleepy Drops	19	3	
	6	Tooth Light	23	4		5.5	Medicine	19	3	
	7	Sunshine Light	17	3		7	Magic Water	14	2	
	8	Mr. Sunshine	15	2		8	Magic Medicine	9	2	
n=647		Other	92	13	n=591	Other	188	68		
MIRROR	1	Mirror	303	59	METHOD OF ADMINISTERING ANESTHETIC	1	Pinch (small, tiny, etc.)	315	40	
	2	(Small, Little) Mirror	104	20		2	Mosquito Bite	110	17	
	3	Mouth Mirror	20	4		3	Spray	32	4	
	4	Doll's Mirror	18	3		4	Sting	20	2	
	5	My Mirror	11	2		5	Put Tooth to Sleep	19	2	
	6	Special Mirror	10	2		6	Push	16	2	
	7	Looking Glass	6	1		7	Squirt	15	2	
n=516		Other	44	9	n=783	8	Do Not Mention	13	2	
EXPLORER	1	Tooth Counter	282	46		Other	243	29		
	2	Finger	56	9	FILLING	1	Silver Filling	177	33	
	3	Counter	52	9		2	Silver	64	12	
	4	Explorer	32	5		3	Filling	54	10	
	5	Tooth Feeler	30	5		4	Silver Star	42	8	
	6	Pointer	18	3		5	Silver Soldier	34	6	
	7	Tooth Tickler	13	2		6	Silver Bullet	25	5	
	8	Tooth Pick	12	2		7	Restoration	12	2	
n=613		Other	118	19		n=537	8	Squeaky Silver	9	2
HANDPIECE	1	Whistle	57	8		Other	120	22		
	2	Bug (Sugarbug) Chaser	38	5	RUBBER DAM	1	Raincoat	141	44	
	3	Handpiece	32	4		2	Tooth Raincoat	45	14	
	4	Brush	30	4		3	Rubber Raincoat	30	9	
	5.5	Toothbrush	29	4		4	Rubber Mask	15	5	
	5.5	Tooth Cleaner	29	4		5	Rubber Dam	12	4	
	5.5	Tooth Washer	29	4		6	Mask	8	2	
	8.5	Cleaner	24	3		7.5	Halloween Mask	7	2	
8.5	Electric Toothbrush	24	3	7.5		Do Not Use	7	2		
n=756		Other	464	61	n=322	Other	57	18		
PROPHYLAXIS CUP OR BRUSH	1	Electric Toothbrush	95	24	EXTRACTIONS	1	Wiggle Your Tooth	158	26	
	2	Rubber Toothbrush	46	12		2	Wiggle Tooth Out	124	20	
	3	Special Toothbrush	40	10		3	Wiggle	30	5	
	4	Toothbrush	27	7		4	Remove Your Tooth	27	4	
	5	Rubber Cup	19	5		5	Wiggle Tooth	20	3	
	6	Tooth Cleaner	16	4		6	Wiggle Out	18	3	
	7	Magic Toothbrush	15	4		7.5	Lift It Out	17	3	
	8	Tooth Tickler	10	3		7.5	Help Tooth Out	17	3	
n=394		Other	126	31	n=619	Other	208	33		
DRILL	1	Brush	53	7	HEMORRHAGE	1	Bleeding	64	14	
	2	Bug (Sugarbug) Chaser	46	6		2	Red Stuff	61	14	
	3	Buzzer	44	6		3	No Mention of It	54	12	
	4	Cleaner	38	5		4	Oozing	23	5	
	5	Whistle	38	5		5	Hemorrhage	19	4	
	6	Tooth Cleaner	31	4		6	Little Bleeding	14	3	
	7	Tooth Washer	29	4		7	Ketchup	12	3	
	8	Toothbrush	25	3		8	Bleed a Little	11	2	
n=790		Other	486	60	n=447	Other	189	43		

bers of the Academy (69 percent return). Four tables have been created to present the data that were collected giving word substitutes or phrases (euphemisms) that are used by members of the Academy to greet patients and describe dental office terminology. The results of this study allow practicing dentists to compare and contrast terminology that they use in their office and provides further options for them in communicating with their patients.

## Greeting the New Patient

When asked how members of the Academy greeted their patients on the first visit, members responded as indicated in Table 1. The pedodontists' responses were fairly evenly distributed among the four categories used to tabulate the greetings. The four categories were: an informal greeting, a formal greeting, either an informal or formal greeting depending on the situation, and lastly the use of no greeting at all. The responses ranged from the most frequent, an informal greeting, used by 30 percent of the respondents, to a low of 20 percent of the pedodontists who do not use a greeting. A formal greeting, and the use of either an informal or formal greeting depending on the situation, were intermediate at 21 percent and 29 percent respectively.

The bottom portion of Table 1 gives examples of the kinds of greetings tallied under each of the greeting categories. The number of responding pedodontists who said they used a particular greeting is also shown. Among the informal greetings, a straight forward, "Hi, how are you?" was the most frequently used. While among the formal greetings, "Hello", followed by the patient's name was given as being most frequently used by pedodontists. Surprisingly, the survey revealed that many pedodontists (20 percent) do not directly greet their new patients, but instead, simply initiated a conversation with a statement such as, "I've been looking forward to seeing you.", or "What a pretty girl! (or big boy)."

## Dental Office Terminology

The data in Table 2 were collected in response to the following question presented to the pedodontists surveyed: "When explaining a new procedure to the patient, which terms do you use to describe the operatory equipment, instruments, and dental procedures?"

The Table presents the eight most frequently used terms. The terms are rank-ordered from the most frequently to the eighth most frequently given response. The column labeled "frequency" indicates the number of pedodontists who use each particular name for their equipment. The total number of responses (i.e. the terms listed for each piece of equipment, instru-

ment, and procedure) are indicated in the column labeled "operatory equipment." The number of responses varies from one piece of equipment to another because respondents often listed more than one name for each piece of equipment.

By inspecting the percentage column, it can be seen that the eight most frequently used terms for each piece of operatory equipment, instrument, and procedure, generally accounted for 75% to 85% of all the responses given. The most notable exceptions occurred for the handpiece and drill (bur). These two pieces of operatory equipment generated the greatest number of responses, 756 and 790, respectively, with no one particular name predominating over the others for either piece of equipment. The taking of X-rays had the fewest different names for a procedure. The five most frequently used names for X-rays accounted for 93 percent of all names used by pedodontists to describe this procedure.

## Clustering of Related Names

In the process of rank-ordering the terms supplied by members of the Academy for the various names used to describe the equipment, instruments, and procedures, certain commonalities or clusterings of similar names were noted. The clusterings or groups of related names are presented in Table 3. The number of times each term was listed as being used by a pedodontist is presented in the column labeled, "frequency." The percentage column indicates what percentage of the total number of responses to each piece of operatory equipment is represented by the cluster group as a whole. For example, for the operatory equipment, "chair," a group of space related names was noted and listed in Table 3, including the frequency with which each name was given. This group of space-related names represents approximately 4 percent of all responses given to the piece of operatory equipment, chair. If no clustering of related names was noted for a piece of equipment, instrument, or procedure, it was not listed in Table 3, e.g. X-rays.

## Unusual (Humorous) Dental Terminology

Table 4 is a compilation of terms used by members of the Academy to describe dental office equipment, instruments, and procedures which the authors considered unusual and/or humorous. The data from this Table are testimony that the vocabulary of communicating with the child dental patient is endless and limited only by the imagination of the dental health team.

**Table 3. Clustering of related names**

Operatory Equipment	Cluster Group	Name Used	Frequency	Percentage	Operatory Equipment	Cluster Group	Name Used	Frequency	Percentage		
CHAIR	Space Related	Astronaut Chair	8	4%	DRILL	Brush Related	Airplane Brush	1	16%		
		Space Chair	7				Brush	53			
		Rocket Chair	2				Brusher	4			
		Space Ship Seat	2				Brush With Metal Bristles	1			
		Cpt. Kirk's Chair	1				Bug Brush	2			
		Rocket Ship Chair	1				Bur Brush	1			
		Pilot Seat	1				Cavity Brush	1			
		Spaceman's Chair	1				Cleaner Brush	1			
		Star Wars Lifter	1				Electric Brush	14			
							Little Brush	1			
	Furniture	Chair	319	51%		Metal Brush	3				
		Seat	7			Mr. Brushy	1				
		Couch	7			Paint Brush	2				
		Bed	6			Steel Brush	1				
		Table	4			Tooth Cavity Brush	1				
		Easy Chair	2			Tooth Decay Brush	1				
		Bench	1			Tooth Fixing Brush	1				
		Sofa	1			Toothbrush	25				
	LIGHT	Sun Related	Sunshine	55		19%	Wire Brush	1			
Sunshine Light			17	Whistle Brush	6						
Mr. Sunshine			15	Whistling Toothbrush	2						
Sun			11								
Sunlight			11	Whistle Related	Mr. Whistle		11				
Mr. Sun			6		Mr. Whistler		2				
Sunshine Machine			2		Tommy Whistle		1				
My Sun			1		Tooth Whistler		2				
Big Sun			1		Water Whistle		7				
Electric Sunshine			1		Whistle		38				
Star			1		Whistle Bug		2				
					Whistle Brush		6				
					Whistle Buzzer		1				
		Whistler	16								
		Whistling Toothbrush	2								
		Whistling Charlie	6								
		Magic Whistle	2								
MIRROR	Size Related	Baby Mirror	3	25%	Bug Chaser Related	Bug Brush	2	10%			
		Doll's Mirror	18		Bug Catcher	5					
		Little, Tiny or Small Mirror	104		Bug (Sugarbug) Chaser	46					
		Nickle Size Mirror	1		Bug Getter	2					
		Princess Mirror	1		Bug Cleaner	5					
HANDPIECE	Whistle Related	Air Whistle	1	20%	Bug Excavator	1					
		Magic Whistle	3		Bug Remover	7					
		Mr. Whistle	17		Bug Scooper	1					
		Mr. Whistler	4		Bug Shovel	1					
		Tommy Whistle	1		Machine That Washes Out Tooth Bugs	2					
		Tooth Whistle	4		Bug Digger Outer	1					
		Water Whistle	10		Bug Cleaner	1					
		Whistle	57		Bug Eater	2					
		Whistle and Spray	1		Bug Remover	1					
		Whistle Brush	7		Tooth Bug Remover	3					
		Whistle Bug	2								
		Whistler	20								
		Whistling Charlie	7								
	Whistle Engine	1									
	Whistle Drill	1									
	Whistle Holder	1									
	Whistling Pete	1									
	Whistling Machine	2									
	Whistling Brush	1									
	Whistling Toothbrush	4									
	Bug/Sugarbug Related	Bug/Sugarbug Related	Bug Brush Holder		2	8%	METHOD OF ADMINISTERING ANESTHETIC	Squirt Related	Squirt	15	6%
			Bug Catcher		2		Squirt Gun	8			
			Bug (Sugarbug) Chaser		38		Squirt	14			
			Bug Remover		1		Squirt on Tooth	3			
			Bug Cleaner		3		Squirt Some Medicine	1			
			Bug Duster		1		Squirt Sleepy Water	4			
			Bug Getter		1						
Bug Machine			1								
Decay Bug Chaser			2								
Sugarbug Brush			1								
Sugarbug Cleaner			1								
Sugarbug Shovel			1								
Sugarbug Digger Outer			1								
Whistle Bug			2								
Brush Related	Brush Related	Brush	30	6%	FILLING	Types of Fillings	Bionic Filling	3	38%		
		Brush Holder	2				Cowboy Filling	1			
		Brusher	1				Flintstone Filling	1			
		Air Brush	2				Princess/Prince Filling	1			
		Bouncy Brush	1				Mickey Mouse Filling	13			
		Bug Brush Holder	2				Silver Filling	177			
		Fire Engine Brush	2				Shiny Filling	5			
		Jet Brush	1				Magic Filling	1			
		Little Brush	2				White Filling	2			
		Magic Brush	2								
		Paint Brush	1								
		Sugarbug Brush	1								
		Tooth Cavity Brush	1								
RUBBER DAM	Masks	Batman Mask	4	13%			Lone Ranger	2			
					Halloween	8					
					Carnival Disguise	1					
					Mask	8					
					Monkey Mask	1					
					Rubber Mask	15					
					Special Mask	1					
					Tooth Mask	1					

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**Table 4. Unusual (Humorous) dental terminology**

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<b>CHAIR</b> Banana Chair Happy Face Chair	<b>X RAYS</b> Big Bird Machine Crackers
<b>LIGHT</b> Tooth Bug Spotlight	<b>ANESTHETIC</b> Balloon Juice Fairy Juice Goofy Juice
<b>MIRROR</b> Bug Mirror Fairy Mirror Lolly Pop Mirror	<b>METHOD OF ADMINISTERING ANESTHETIC</b> Good Fairy Kiss Kiss Gun Little Tweek Ouchie Pant Like a Dog Yucky Stuff
<b>EXPLORER</b> Bug Finder Charlie the Chicken Cricket Franastan	<b>FILLING</b> Bionic Teeth Good Bugs Mouse Star Silver Band-Aid
<b>HANDPIECE</b> Beaver Biffy Buff Buff Brownie Chaser Cavity Eraser Rain From Spain Jet Airline	<b>RUBBER DAM</b> Tent Tooth Raincoat
<b>PROPHYLAXIS CUP OR BRUSH</b> Squeaky Rubber Bunny	<b>EXTRACTION</b> Captain Crunch Do a Magic Trick Let Tooth Dance Out Railroad
<b>DRILL</b> Bandit Chaser Bumpy Beaver Malcom Motor Boat Motorcycle Noisy Thing	

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## Conclusion

Like many of the techniques used in dentistry, effective communication with child patients has evolved over the years and complex vocabularies have been developed. The authors of this study have attempted to present a current state-of-the-art of euphemistic language in pediatric dental practice. To date, this is the only study which presents a review of terminology currently used by practicing pedodontists, even though it is widely recognized that proper communication with the child patient forms an integral part of present day pedodontic care.

The results of this study have demonstrated that even though there is a wide diversity in the terminology utilized by the responding pedodontists to greet patients, and describe dental office procedures, instruments, and equipment, trends do exist in their communication patterns. By being aware of the terminology that is currently encountered in pediatric dentistry,

practicing dentists will be able to compare and contrast the terminology that they use in their office. The findings also will provide further options for the doctors in communicating with their patients. Perhaps, dentists who find it difficult to establish positive relationships with child patients will now have a more complete repertoire of terminology which may aid them in achieving better cooperation and establishing rapport. Pedodontists might now find it less difficult to individualize their communication style moderated by the maturity and level of comprehension of their patients.

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ROBERT B. BERSON is an Assistant Professor, Developmental Dentistry (Pedodontics) University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

DANIEL BROSTOFF is a Clinical Associate Professor, Developmental Dentistry (Pedodontics) University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

JAMES T. MARTINOFF is the Director of Dental Education, Office of Academic Affairs, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

Requests for reprints may be sent to Robert B. Berson, Assistant Professor, Developmental Dentistry (Pedodontics) University of Southern California, 945 W. 34th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90007.