

# SPECIAL REPORT



## Ages and Stages

by Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman

As a dental practitioner working with children, you know all too well that kids sometimes demonstrate annoying, irritating, and frustrating behaviors. These behaviors can challenge your patience and they require a variety of discipline strategies and verbal skills. When disruptive behaviors occur in the dental office, it takes more than knowledge of oral problems to clean a set of teeth or fill a cavity.

To increase your effectiveness at managing disruptive behaviors in young patients, a thorough understanding of children's needs and motivations is necessary. When you bring an understanding of normal childhood development to your work with children, you will be more likely to have them behave in ways that help you complete the job before you without disruption or complication. The key is to become familiar with behavioral variations in children at different developmental stages.

The paragraphs below briefly outline the various developmental stages children go through. Included are the behaviors characteristic of specific ages. We offer this information to help you know what to expect from your young patients so that you can deal with them with understanding and compassion.

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### **18 months to 3 years**

Children that are **18 months to 3 years** of age are constantly on the move, easily frustrated, easily distracted, and have an attention span of approximately 1-3 minutes. They tend to be self-centered. During this developmental period, which is often called "the terrible two's," or "the imperial age," children are very dependent upon their parents. Separation anxiety is the strongest at this age. In addition, children around the age of two have

limited communication skills and have difficulty with verbal expression. Crying and whining is a common response when they are upset. Your work with them will be easier and more successful if you understand that crying, saying no, and not being able to sit still are common behaviors for this age group.

When working with these youngsters, keep the appointment

time short and use distraction as a way to involve them in thinking about other things rather than about the fact that you are working on their teeth. TV or a favorite video can be an effective distraction. A parent or another staff member can assist with redirecting the child's attention to other stimuli such as pictures of Disney characters on the wall or colors and shapes in the room.

### **3 to 4 years**

Children **3 to 4 years** of age are beginning to communicate better but easily revert to tears, crying, and whining. The increase in whining may be an indication of a need for more attention. At three, the separation anxiety is not as strong, and the child is more interested in exploring his world.

At this age, children are curious, imaginative, and enjoy being included in the process. Use this to your advantage by arousing their curiosity with interesting names for instruments and colorful descriptions of the procedures and by inviting them to "help" you by holding an instrument or pushing a button. The favorite word at this developmental stage is "why." Answer their questions with stories that capture their imagination. The more you can involve the child in thinking about your words, the more eager he or she will be to please. The attention span in this age range has increased slightly, to about 4-5 minutes. Distraction and redirection as mentioned above is still very effective.

### **4 to 5 years**

Children **4 to 5 years** of age are beginning to gain a stronger sense of self and tend to be bossy and insistent. They may attempt to impose their will. A four-year-old is not swayed by a threat of punishment and often becomes defiant to test the limits.

The dental practitioner who takes the stance of "Do it because I said so" will find a headstrong four-year-old who insists, "You can't make me." Power struggles can occur quickly, and usually no one wins. The use of limited choices becomes an effective strategy at this age. Involving the child in the procedure as much as possible and explaining how she can help in the next step is crucial to her sense of personal power. The more empowered she feels, the easier the management of her behavior becomes.



"I knew I'd rub holes in them with all that brushing."

### **5 to 6 years**

The **5- to 6-**year-old dental patient is entering a stage in which he requires less parental support and involvement. At this developmental age, children show a greater interest in material possessions and like to act “grown up.” They have difficulty seeing things from other people’s points of view and like to do things their own way. Appealing to their sense of vanity at this age can help position the dental practitioner as one who is interested in them and their point of view. This is also a good age to involve the patient in hand signaling and setting the pace of the procedure.

### **7 to 10 years**

At the ages of **7 to 10**, children are exuberant, cocky, talkative, and overestimate their ability. They become increasingly more interested in friends than in family and are drawn to TV and video games. Many dental practitioners continue to use videos as an effective means of distraction even at this age.

It is important to avoid excess criticism when children at this age do not succeed at tasks. They can become very upset over failure and withdraw from participating in new activities.

When working with children at this developmental level, explain everything as you go along. Continue to give them a “play-by-play” report of the procedure. For

them, knowledge is power. Empower them with names of instruments and some of the specifics of the process they are undergoing.

### **Adolescent years**

The **11- to 12-**year-old tends to be a bundle of energy. They can be argumentative, rude, and obnoxious, and they hold grudges and blame others for their actions. While they frequently rebel against the authority of home, school, and church, when they are away from home or school they may exhibit the opposite behavior if they don’t perceive a strong authoritarian push. They rebel against a request from a strong authority figure even when they know it is just what they need or want. They will say no just because someone in authority said yes.

Position yourself as an advocate. Encourage their input. Provide them with choices and options. Educate them about the various procedures that you provide at your office. Seek ways to invite them to be a part of their oral care team. They do not want to be at your office. The entire process is a bother to them, so provide them with ways to make the appointment fast and easy.

### **Teenage years**

The **13- to 19-**year old can be a mixed bag of enthusiasm, joy, moodiness, and complaints. Their response to you will be based on the experiences they have had at dental offices in the past. If they came from

a different office and had negative experiences, you can appeal to their sense of reason, demonstrating for them how you are different. Explore past experiences with them and show how you can make their present experience much different.

Teenagers want to be heard and respected. Treat them like adults, and if they act like children bring it to their attention by pointing out the

behavior you want from them. Don't say, "You're acting like a child." Say instead, "What I really need from you right now is . . ."

If they have been a part of your family practice since their childhood, hopefully you took the time to build a sense of connectedness and trust. The more trust you built when they were younger, the more trust they will have in you now.

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Children do not inherently choose disruptive behaviors. Their behavior is a result of their lack of understanding of the situation and is characteristic of the developmental stage they are currently in. The more you as a dental practitioner can familiarize yourself with the ages and stages of your young patients, the more effective you will be in creating a dental practice that extends to the entire family.

For more information on how to manage children's behavior in the dental office, visit [www.dentaltalk.net](http://www.dentaltalk.net). Order your copy of *Dental Talk: How to Manage Children's Behavior with Effective Verbal Skills*, by Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman.

For more information on other important parenting concerns, visit [www.thomashaller.com](http://www.thomashaller.com) and [www.chickmoorman.com](http://www.chickmoorman.com). Sign up for the FREE e-mail parenting newsletter at either site. You will receive a monthly newsletter filled with valuable tips and ideas for raising responsible, caring, confident children written and distributed by two of the world's foremost parenting authorities, Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman.

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