

Positive Insights to Tr & Communicating with Teenage Patients

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Whether you have teenage patients in your general practice or your pedodontic practice, you are bound to face the daunting task of creating rapport and eliciting compliance from an age group that is most often the toughest for adults to understand and communicate with – adolescents. For the past 14 years, I have had the challenging and energizing experience of communicating with teenagers as an assembly speaker in hundreds of middle schools and high schools. My job has taken me to 47 states, put me in front of one million teens and their parents, and taught me how to immediately connect with and evoke enthusiasm from up to 2,000 teens at a time in gymnasiums, auditoriums and classrooms all across America.

The most exciting, heartwarming and demanding aspect of my work is when I stay after assemblies and talk one-on-one or in small groups with teens who have serious personal concerns about alcohol and drugs, teen sexuality, depression, excess stress, low self-esteem to self-loathing, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, violent feelings, and more. Sounds heavy, doesn't it? I communicate with young people in such a way that they feel safe, accepted and awakened to a new awareness that they have choices – they can remain miserable and alone, or reach out from their self-imposed isolation and find HOPE!

Over the years, I have had the privilege of reaching 25,000 individual angst-ridden teens through such conversations. And from these conversations I have learned an important lesson: how to talk to teens so they take positive action on their own behalf. In the world of dentistry, orthodontics and pedodontics, you, too, may have days when you wish you had a magic wand to zap a teenage patient into communicating, compliance or just a pleasant attitude!

So, what more can you do to motivate a teenage patient to relax, communicate and even cooperate

eating

with their dental health and/or orthodontic program?

- ✓ Remember that teens often have low self-esteem that interferes with their ability to believe that they are worthy of self-care, much less believing they are likable, no matter WHAT you do with their teeth. Authoritarian judgments, nagging and punishments often backfire with such a teen. Connecting with them on their feelings, accepting them as they are, and compassionately encouraging them can go a long way in gaining compliance.
- ✓ It helps to understand teenage brain development and its impact on how they think. Teenagers have an undeveloped pre-frontal cortex. Teenagers' prefrontal cortex, where they reason and grasp consequences, starts growing at age 11 or 12 and keeps growing until 24 years old. This means that at 13 or 15 or even 17, you (and certainly their parents) may wonder, "What in the world were they thinking?" when a teen loses an appliance, completely neglects to brush teeth, or other such frustrations. The truth is, they truly AREN'T thinking some of the time! Their brains aren't yet wired to grasp and be motivated by the long-term consequences that adults can envision.
- ✓ This implies it is counter-productive to dominate, nag, scold or complain about this "normal" unacceptable behavior. It only diminishes a teen's self-esteem further and encourages them to act out their self-loathing, fear, anger and hurt through recalcitrance, withdrawal and a plethora of available, dangerous escapes. Instead, consider utilizing "affirming communication techniques."



Affirming Communication Techniques (Useful for dental professionals and parents alike)

Be aware of your body language:

- Look them in the eye
- Keep a calm, non-judgmental attitude
- Have a calm, relaxed expression with a mild smile on your face
- Relax your arms by your sides versus crossed on your chest with head thrust forward in a threatening position.

Share stories and show interest in THEIR world:

- Teens respond to adults who share stories with life lessons rather than adults who preach at them. Consider sharing a story about what it was like for you as a teen or for your teenage friends when you were their age (whether the story is real or made-up!).

- For an example: Share about a friend from when you were in high school that had very decayed, crooked, unattractive teeth and clearly felt unlikable because of his/her looks. So, the teenage friend started running with a group of kids who didn't feel they "fit in" with the popular crowd. Some teens in the group were experimenting with drugs and eventually he tried it, too. He/she stopped caring about school and never went on to college, though he was smart enough. He/she never lived up to all their potential or his/her dreams which might not have happened had the friend done something positive for him/herself like getting regular dental care to fix the unsightly decay, brushing, straightening their teeth and, bottom line, feeling more attractive and hopeful about his/her life.



- Emphasize the feelings the teens had in your stories and your own feelings about it. Teens relate to feelings. Every teen has felt they weren't good enough, wallowed in self-loathing or self-pity, and most likely, on multiple occasions. Every teen has felt unloved by his/her parents and peers at one moment or another. Every teen has the fear of not being accepted and loved, of failing to meet parents' expectations.
- If you suspect a teen patient comes from a highly critical, controlling home environment, try encouraging the teen to take baby steps in their treatment plan each day. Let them know they don't have to be perfect to make progress, that should they forget to follow thru on one day, simply start over the next. Suggest that dental hygiene and orthodontia are about making progress every day, not perfection. Give them room to experience small successes by considering a reward system.
- Consider getting technologically savvy. Do you have an iPod? Why not talk to teens about it, what music they've downloaded, which music groups they prefer. Consider having staff go online to iTUNES and print off the top songs of the week. This list could make a good conversation starter and build rapport with teens. Many teens love music from a wide variety of eras, perhaps even yours! Teens use music extensively to connect with their peers. Why not with the dentist's, pedodontist's, or orthodontist's staff as well?

Ask for their opinions:

- Conclude stories by asking teens for THEIR opinions: "Do you know someone who feels really bad about themselves, too? What would you tell them to do?"

Give them safe passage to talk:

- Allow them to have an opinion even if it seems 'wrong', 'immature', or 'scary' to you.
- LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN! Try responding with, "I feel uncomfortable with your feedback. You said you think that the teen I shared about did the right thing hanging with a bad crowd because he didn't like him/herself. A lot of bad things happened to him/her because of that choice. Maybe if he/she had talked to their parents, they could have helped. What do you think his/her parents could have done to help? Are YOU comfortable talking to your parents about how you are feeling?" If a teen shrugs or says no, offer to talk to their parents with them and broach a subject that he/she seems fearful of handling by him/herself.

Play fair and praise often:

- Try praising often. Acknowledge what a teen is doing right, rather than immediately noticing the things they are doing wrong. Help them feel good about small gains, and then suggest necessary improvements he/she can make.
- Don't take a teen's failure to comply or an "attitude" personally or as your own failure. In this way, you can stay more patient and be a better listener and encourager.
- Release unrealistic expectations while maintaining appropriate expectations and consequences for

failing to meet commitments in their dental or orthodontic care. Have clear procedures and expectations, then discuss with your teenage patients the consequences in advance so there are no surprises. Consider asking teens to define the consequences/rewards they think would be the most motivating for them. Then have a conversation with parent and teen together, perhaps even sign a contract between them. Consider having parents agree to consequences should they be too dominating, nagging or scolding!

- Bartering tools for teens are very basic and the most powerful of all are those that disconnect them temporarily from their peers. Suspending cell phone or Internet use, or access to a favorite pair of "popular" jeans or tennis shoes make for powerful consequences when necessary.

Key to all communication with a teen is to accept that teenagers will not always like you! Guiding a teen is not a popularity contest to be sure. If you continue to show them that you care by being compassionate, patient, kind, courteous and sincere, teenagers will listen. Though you may not always get a verbal agreement, sometimes barely a head nod, they are listening and care most about being accepted and loved – perhaps even by their dentist or pedodontist, and your staff.

In conclusion, dentists, pedodontists and your staff can play an important role in a teenager's self-esteem. Providing a teen with a pleasant appearance is a worthy and wonderful goal, in and of itself. Adding an attitude of acceptance, kindness, patience, a listening ear and a personal story gives them a safe place in their world to be themselves and an anchor of wise guidance to help them make good choices.

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