

Make it magical

Alice Garside explains her approach to treating child patients.



When it comes to child patients, we have to make the dental experience magical so they feel safe. I make eye contact, I am animated, I make them feel welcome and include them in every aspect of their dental



Alice Garside

is a dental hygienist who practises at The Neem Tree in Surrey.

experience. I will slowly introduce dental words from an early age, but explain the process to them in a way they will understand and remember when they are adults. I don't just tell them what to do, I offer them choices. They need to trust me and feel they have some control. We will then build on this to break down barriers and develop rapport with each other. It's their smile journey as well – it's not just about what mum and dad think.

We do a lot of acclimatisation appointments to get children used to the dental environment. They do not necessarily sit in the chair straight away. If they wish, they can come to my side of the chair to play with the buttons – the Belmont

chair we have at The Neem Tree is really good like that. With its space age-like control panel, it looks like something from the kids' film, *Inside Out*. The children can also have a ride in the chair so they understand how it works, why it's moving and where they are supposed to be on it. There is never any awkwardness about how to get into it – and at first it doesn't feel like they are sitting in a dental chair. We chat and then it slides into position at the touch of a button. Some kids love the little light on it, so I sometimes ask if they can pop it on for me – it's like having another dental nurse in the room. We are looking to add a new child-friendly hygiene surgery to the

practice and I'm really hoping we get a pink Belmont chair!

With older children, you need to find a way to connect. Often you can use their medical history. You can ask them what they like to eat and drink and then give them the floor. That way, they will often divulge more information, so leave space for them. Try to find ways to identify with a patient so you can build trust and develop the relationship before any actual treatment takes place. Ultimately, though, it's less about age and more about personality type.

Giving children choices is key. Whether it is the flavour of the mouthwash, the lip balm or the polish, I invite them to select what they want. I also tell and show them what I am going to do. With the air and the three-in-one, for example, I let them squirt it like a water gun on the tray. It is all about getting them used to the experience. A teenager will also need to have me talk them through this because they may never have had that opportunity to be shown what happens in clinic. I

invite questions and, by explaining things, they become engaged. If it offers an opportunity to learn, I will definitely jump on it. Our paediatric patients are as much a part of the dental experience as the clinicians, and I need them as animated as I am about dentistry.

I am mum to a four-year-old and a seven-year-old and have a 14-year-old niece. In fact, my niece helps me with my TikTok videos on Instagram. They give me some real insight into the world of children and I get to know what's on trend.

Not every appointment involves treatment. I have an amazing cupboard full of great children stuff so any child who is nervous or apprehensive gets to look at all the lovely dental toys. Sometimes, I'll initiate a 'play dental' experience, which gives me the opportunity to explain what happens



during an appointment. I might even invite them to jump in the chair and see if we can work together. We have an Alexa, so I also let children pick what songs they want. I give an hour over to paediatric patients and it is time that really does belong to them.

BDIA