

BARRIERS to Accessing Oral Health Care Services for Adolescents

Adolescents experience many barriers to accessing routine oral health care including inconvenient hours and scheduling processes, fear of pain or judgment, and not feeling welcome in office environments. Routine professional dental care and good oral hygiene during adolescence can reduce the occurrence of oral health diseases and prevent irreversible damage. Good oral health also contributes to improved school attendance among adolescents¹. Take a look at these strategies and resources to increase adolescents' access to dental care and support their adoption of good oral health habits.

STRATEGIES for Increasing Adolescent Oral Health Care Utilization

Make your services accessible to youth.

- Offer your services at times when youth are available. This may include after-school, evening, and/or weekend hours. Survey your adolescent patients on their preferences.
- Maintain an up-to-date website and social media presence that lists your hours, location, insurance and payment options, and services.
- Offer patients the option to schedule appointments via text or on your website.
- Provide youth access to services on short notice by offering drop-in, same-day, or next-day visits.
- Establish policies and procedures to ensure young people can access services for free or at low cost (e.g., a sliding fee scale).
- Provide services in a location that young people can easily get to. If your location is not ideal, try offering transportation assistance (e.g., bus tokens, cab fare, shuttle service). You can also install a bike rack near your facility for youth who bike to appointments.
- Bring your services to young people. This can include partnering with youth-serving organizations (e.g., schools, community centers, and non-profits) to offer your services through a [mobile dental clinic](#)².
- Provide services and materials in the languages spoken most in your community.

Create a welcoming environment.

- Maintain a clean and welcoming environment. Some ways to [make your space more youth-friendly](#)³ include having magazines for teens, cell phone charging stations, and artwork by local teens.
- Develop and post a non-discrimination policy so youth of all identities know they are welcome.
- Review intake forms, handouts, [posters](#)⁴, and other materials to ensure they are inclusive (e.g., images reflect the diversity of your community, language is [LGBTQ+ inclusive](#)⁵) and [easy to understand](#)⁶.
- [Train](#)⁷ staff to provide friendly, respectful, and non-judgmental services to youth.
- Show interest in developing interpersonal relationships with adolescent patients by asking about their interests and hobbies, maintaining open body language and talking directly to the young person (not only to their parent). This can put adolescents at ease and help them to build trust with their provider.

Use strengths-based approaches to care.

- Adolescents sometimes fear being scolded for having poor oral health habits (e.g., not flossing, drinking too many sugary beverages). Consider using [Motivational Interviewing](#)⁸ techniques to support adolescents and facilitate behavior change.
- Acknowledge the ways an adolescent patient is exhibiting healthy behaviors. For example, congratulate them on making their own appointment or brushing twice daily.
- Avoid using jargon when speaking with adolescent patients. Clearly communicate what is happening during every step of the visit and encourage adolescent patients to ask questions along the way.
- Offer or teach coping strategies to adolescents to reduce anxiety during their appointments. Strategies may include distraction (e.g., watching a TV, playing with a squishy toy, listening to music) and relaxation (e.g., deep breathing).
- Consider having a list of local referral resources available to connect adolescent patients to additional services in your community. For example, a patient that experiences significant anxiety during their dental visits may have additional mental health needs and could benefit from meeting with a mental health professional.

Encourage adolescents to return for follow-up care.

- [Text appointment](#)⁹ reminders to adolescent patients.
- Offer points for every visit that can be saved up to “purchase” prizes like games, headphones, and nail polish. Ask your adolescent patients for input on the types of prizes they would like to receive.

Collect feedback from adolescent patients.

- It is important to routinely [collect](#)¹⁰ feedback from young people to ensure your dental practice is meeting the needs of your adolescent patients.
- If you're short on time, implement mini-surveys, or 1-2 question surveys, to get quick feedback on an issue or initiative affecting your adolescent patients. For example, do your adolescent patients think your wait time is too long? Ask them to complete a mini-survey to gather their ideas about how to make the wait time more enjoyable at your clinic.
- Ask your adolescent patients to complete patient satisfaction surveys about their experience. To get started, take a look at the sample surveys included at the end of this Starter Guide, which were informed by the Adolescent Health Initiative's Teen Advisory Council. Once you've drafted your survey, ask a few of your adolescent patients or a local youth advisory council to provide feedback on its [clarity](#)¹¹.
- You may also consult with a youth council at a local school or youth-serving organization to get feedback on how to make your services more appealing to youth. Use collected feedback to inform quality improvement initiatives.

Care for pregnant adolescents

- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all pregnant adolescents seek professional oral health care during the first trimester.
- Obtain a thorough medical history and perform a comprehensive evaluation which includes a thorough dental history, dietary history, clinical examination, and caries risk assessment.

- Read the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's [guidelines](#)¹² on Oral Health Care for the Pregnant Adolescent for more recommendations.

Care for adolescents with special health care needs

- Patients with special health care needs may require longer appointment times. Consider creating a workflow for office staff to schedule increased length appointments when necessary.
- Complete a thorough patient medical history at each visit to decrease the risk of aggravating a medical condition while providing dental care or planning dental treatment.
- Coordinate care regarding medications, general anesthesia and other special restrictions or preparations with the patient's other health care providers to ensure the safe delivery of oral care.
- Familiarize yourself with community-based resources for patients with special health care needs to be prepared in the event that you need to make a referral.
- Read The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's [guidelines](#)¹³ on Management of Dental Patients with Special Health Care Needs for more recommendations.

Care for adolescents who use tobacco and other drugs

- Dental clinicians have a unique opportunity to intervene to prevent and treat tobacco use in adolescent patients. Consider using [brief evidence-based interventions](#)¹⁴ to increase tobacco cessation activities in your dental office.
- Use a non-judgmental tone with adolescent patients when substance use is confirmed or suspected to build a trusting patient-provider relationship.
- Familiarize yourself with local facilities, community resources, and self-help groups to assist with identifying treatment and coping resources for adolescents.
- Modify sedation procedures, administration of local anesthetics, and prescribing practices when providing treatment to a patient suspected of substance use to avoid adverse drug interactions, or possible relapse.
- Review the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's [Policy](#)¹⁵ on Substance Abuse in Adolescent Patients for more information.

Additional Recommendations

- The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's [Guideline on Adolescent Oral Care](#)¹⁶ addresses the unique needs of adolescent patients and proposes recommendations for management.
- The American Medical Association's [Disparities in Children's Oral Health and Access to Dental Care](#)¹⁷ discusses the consequences of childhood oral disease, factors that contribute to disparities in children's oral health and access to care, and policies that may reduce these disparities.

- ¹ <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.82.12.1663>
- ² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4190815/>
- ³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAu5ad82718>
- ⁴ http://www.umhs-adolescenthealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/tactac_poster-final-nologo_2.pdf
- ⁵ <https://www.lgbthealtheducation.org/wp-content/uploads/Collecting-Sexual-Orientation-and-Gender-Identity-Data-in-EHRs-2016.pdf>
- ⁶ https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/simply_put.pdf
- ⁷ <http://www.umhs-adolescenthealth.org/improving-care/spark-trainings/>
- ⁸ <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/motivational-interviewing>
- ⁹ <https://providers.bedsider.org/pages/digital-tools>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.umhs-adolescenthealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/collecting-patient-satisfaction-surveys-from-adolescents-starter-guide.pdf>
- ¹¹ https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/simply_put.pdf
- ¹² http://www.aapd.org/media/Policies_Guidelines/BP_Pregnancy.pdf
- ¹³ http://www.aapd.org/media/Policies_Guidelines/BP_SHCN.pdf
- ¹⁴ http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/112835/9789241506953_eng.pdf;jsessionid=3D153858CE9ECB6DE0F8C4537EFF9C44?sequence=1
- ¹⁵ http://www.aapd.org/media/Policies_Guidelines/P_SubstanceAbuse.pdf
- ¹⁶ http://www.aapd.org/media/Policies_Guidelines/G_Adoleshealth.pdf
- ¹⁷ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/193312>

Patient Experience Survey

We would like to hear about your visit to our health center today. Please take a few minutes to complete this anonymous survey. Your opinions are important to us and help us improve our services!

How old are you? _____
What is your race/ethnicity? _____
What is your gender? _____

Dental office staff answered all of my questions during my visit today.
Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

Dental office staff clearly explained everything during my visit today.
Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

I will tell dental office staff my concerns even if they do not ask.
Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

I know what information about my visit today will be kept private.
Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

I would recommend this health center to my friends.
Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

What else would you like us to know about your experience here?

Thank you for your feedback!

Additional questions proposed by youth council for optional inclusion:

During today's visit, I felt (check all that apply):
Comfortable Supported
Respected Welcomed
Safe None of the above

Dental office staff are (check all that apply):
Accepting Professional
Approachable Nonjudgmental

-
- Easy to understand
 - None of the above

Patient Experience Survey

We would like to hear about your visit to our dental office today. Please take a few minutes to complete this anonymous survey. Your opinions are important to us and help us improve our services!

How satisfied are you with today's visit?

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

How likely are you to refer a friend or family member to this health center?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Very unlikely

What is one thing you love about this dental office?

If you could change one thing about this dental office, what would you change?