

# Play time

Building trust and making dental visits fun are the key elements in successfully treating children, says **Aimee McGahon**

Fergus and I set up our surgery, Friel and McGahon Dental, in 2015. It is important for us that our practice is family friendly. We have five of our own children (one newly born!), so I would hope that we have some idea of what makes children tick and how to deal with them.

In my opinion, the most important things with treating children are gaining trust, forming a strong relationship, patience, making the experience fun and age appropriate, and rewarding positive behaviour.

## Building trust

Trust is very important; I feel you should always be honest with a child, and let them know if something is going to hurt or taste bad – but play it down. Then they know they can trust you when you say something isn't going to be sore. If you lose their trust then you lose their cooperation.

For children, fear of the unknown is the major problem, so I always explain every procedure to them in great detail before it happens, using demonstrations on their hands if possible. Fissure sealants are perfect for this.

It's very important for children to feel a connection to you and form a relationship. More than any other patient, it is important to show child patients the person behind the clinical mask. I will always discuss my own children and dogs and things that I know are current and relevant to children, so that they see me as a person and not just a dentist. It's important to keep these conversations relevant to the age of the

## Aimee McGahon

Aimee graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 2002. She then worked in Dublin and Drogheda before moving home in 2004, setting up Friel and McGahon Dental in 2015. She is a member of the Irish Dental Association and is registered with the Irish Dental Council. Being a mother of five, she has great understanding of how to deal with children and makes dentistry fun for them. She was nominated as a finalist for the Sensodyne Sensitive Dentist of the Year Awards in 2016.



Aimee McGahon with her husband Fergus Friel

## THE SIMPLEST FORM OF REWARD IS PRAISE, AND CHILDREN LOVE IT

child. Conversations like these also help to distract children from procedures.

It is also essential not to rush a child's treatment. You need to have lots of patience. Spread out their treatment plan, having multiple visits if need be. Start with the easier treatments and work your way up to the more invasive ones. This helps to build up their trust and confidence in you. Keep in mind that children are more

cooperative when they are not tired, so encourage the parent to book morning appointments for them.

## The fun factor

The fun factor is probably one of the most important aspects of easing children's anxiety. I would divide it into two areas: firstly, having a fun surgery and, secondly, making the experience of dentistry fun.

We make our surgery fun in a number of ways. The surgery is bright and airy and all staff are smiling and friendly. Cartoons are on in the waiting room, and we have a lovely collection of modern, funny dentistry related books and a fun oral hygiene instruction puppet in there too. We also have multiple 'fairy doors'. You can ramp

## AWARD WINNERS

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A treasure box of toys!

up the fun level further by customising your fairy doors, so that they are more magical than the ones children have at home, and by naming your fairies and puppets and creating characters for them. We have Pearl, Flossy, Scrubby and Macavity, among others, residing at the surgery. These details can be the ice breaker you need to first engage with a child.

We make the experience of the dental visit fun for children by using novelty protective eyewear, giving younger children a spin in the chair and tickling them with a three-in-one syringe. Don't underestimate how much fun a child can get from these simple things.

It is important, however, to recognise the



Meet Pearl, Flossy, Scrubby and Macavity - fairies at Friel and McGahon Dental!



Kids at Friel and McGahon Dental can wear fun protective eyewear during treatment

## AIMEE'S TOP TIPS

- Help kids to see the person behind the 'clinical mask' - so they don't see you as a scary dentist!
- Spread out kids' treatment plans with multiple visits; it'll help build trust and confidence in you
- Children are more cooperative when they are not tired, so encourage parents to book treatments in the mornings
- Make your surgery and waiting room bright and fun
- Reward young patients with personalised balloons, stickers and snap bracelets.

age and maturity of the child, as if you do these things with older children you could lose that very important connection.

## Rewards

Rewarding children is so important. The simplest form of reward is praise, and

children love it. We constantly reward their good behaviour with praise. We also take this a step further by rewarding children with personalised balloons, stickers and snap bracelets with our logo on them.

We are fortunate to have a very fun logo that children love. We like to play around with our logo, having Christmas, Halloween, superhero and princess versions, to name a few. We then print these as stickers to give to children.

For those children who undergo more extensive or invasive treatment, we have a custom-made treasure box of toys from which they can pick something. Just like

the stickers, we are constantly changing the novelty toys that are available in the treasure box to keep it interesting and current for children.

Taking these steps I feel definitely helps get you off to a good start with your child patient as well as adding a bit of fun to your working day.



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