

Rather Relevant Referrals



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Q: When can a child go to a general dentist instead of a pediatric dentist?

A: Every general dentist has different skills and varying comfort zones within which they can work. Although a young mother recently asked me this question, my answer really applies to any referral that a general dentist may make. Although dentists all are trained to practice within what are called "minimum standards of care", there are

many factors that determine what modalities of therapy a dentist feels qualified to provide.

Experience is sometimes the best teacher. For example, I know many excellent dentists who, although many of them have had a great deal of training in oral surgery and periodontal surgery, simply choose not to perform surgical procedures. Usually, the dentists have decided that it is in the best interest of their patient to refer oral surgery procedures to a colleague who may be more qualified. It may also be that the dentists have chosen to develop other skills in their repertoire.

Children pose unique challenges for dentists. A great deal of creativity is required to keep a child comfortable in the chair, and a significant amount of training must be completed by the entire dental office staff to manage pediatric behaviors and to understand the psychology of these very special patients. Most of us understand that it takes approximately 7 positive dental appointments to reverse the impact of one negative experience. Therefore, there is a lot of stress on the dentist and his/her staff to perform properly. Some dentists

absolutely love to treat children, but others prefer to make an appropriate referral to a pediatric dentist. Probably most general dentists are like myself.... We enjoy treating well-behaved children from about age 3 and up, but we also enjoy the freedom to refer those who we cannot comfortably provide a positive dental appointment.

The Dental Board requires 40 hours of continuing dental education (40 classroom hours) every two years as a minimum for a dentist to maintain a license to practice dentistry in Ohio. Although there are some mandatory courses like ones dealing with infection control and substance abuse, the rest of the licensure requirement can be made up of courses of each doctor's choosing., and many dentists choose to get many more hours than the minimum biannual requirement. Each dentist is unique in that he or she can develop any aspect of their professional skills that they so choose to master.

Dentists may also choose to join organizations like the Academy of General Dentistry that require many more hours of continuing education each year to maintain membership. Therefore, when

choosing a dentist it is important to ask for their areas of expertise and if he or she has any.

In any case, referrals are usually made in the best interest of the patient being referred. Under no circumstance, should making an appropriate referral be held against a general dentist. In fact, it may be just the opposite. The mark of an excellent clinician is self knowledge of his or her limitations. Practicing outside of a dentist's comfort zone serves no purpose other than to raise questions of ethics and create undue stress on the doctor/patient relationship.

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