

The IMPACT of Overcoming Dental Fear



Approaching my reception area, I peer over the counter to glance at my next patient, a beautiful and terrified 12 year old girl. Her tiny frame is visibly trembling as she nervously waits for her turn to meet me, another dentist. According to her mom, I will be the third doctor to attempt her much needed dental treatment. The last appointment failed so badly that general sedation in an operating room was recommended to complete simple fillings and remove already loose baby teeth! As I study her face, I can see the sadness and shame. I think to myself, don't worry Anna...we can do this!

With Anna, trust was the key. Although we could never pin point a previous "bad" dental experience, Anna's fear was instinctive. She simply did not want to be "out of control" or vulnerable. Her distress applied to all medical situations including a flu shot in her Pediatrician's office, or a strep test at the ENT. To help her, I needed trust. Anna would have to believe that I would listen to her concerns, answer her questions and that I would not judge her for what she was feeling. Most of all, I knew that I could not begin treatment until Anna was ready.

Ten months and eight "trust building visits" later on a quiet fall afternoon, Anna was our only patient. Our methodology leading up to today included: several hygiene visits cleaning a few teeth at first then adding more, education on plaque control and food choices to avoid future decay, practicing at home with dental mirrors and cotton rolls, intraoral photos celebrating her improved brushing and flossing, anxiety management by her counselor and a "dental student" like visit in which we taught Anna how to use a handpiece, prep a stone model and place a filling all by herself. Ear buds secure and her playlist ready, I looked her in the eye and said, "Anna, you can do this." She nodded through her tears, willing herself to trust me, and we began. Our goal had been one filling, maybe two, and with Anna's permission we accomplished four! During her next visit, three more fillings were placed and two baby teeth extracted all without a single tear! In the next phases of her care, we will tackle Anna's crowded teeth and constricted upper jaw making an appliance that will guide her growth, open her airway, and allow her permanent teeth to erupt into a healthier arch form. Even more exciting, this type of intervention will likely reverse her diagnosed "acid reflux" helping her feel better and eliminating the need for medication!

I share this story for two reasons. First, I am so grateful that Anna was willing to place her trust in us. The opportunity to help her has been amazing and it is one that we will never forget. Second, I believe Anna's story is an excellent example of the power we all have as humans to positively impact each other when we take the time to recognize the opportunity.

You see, I viewed Anna's dental work as much more than removing decay and placing fillings. For me, Anna's tremendous dental fear presented an opportunity to help her on a much deeper level. By giving Anna the tools she needed to conquer her greatest fear and reach her most challenging goal, she proved to herself that she can accomplish anything! Congratulations Anna, I am so proud to be your doctor!

