



TIP SHEET Communication Tools for Dental Visits



Many children feel anxiety during dental visits when new or uncomfortable procedures are performed. Not being able to speak due to dental tools in the mouth can cause even more stress, especially for children who have communication difficulties related to special needs.

Visual communication tools empower children by giving them alternate ways of communicating feelings or asking questions during the dental visit. A few examples of these tools are:

- **Tolerance Rating Scales.** This scale helps your child communicate pain or discomfort during the exam. The scale typically is a strip with a range of 1 to 5 or 1 to 10. The child points to the number that corresponds with his or her current discomfort level; a lower number represents less stress. You can also create a scale using different visuals—like a series of faces that are sad, scared or happy—to help your child communicate emotions.
- **Break Boards.** This tool helps children express the need to take a break during the dental visit. It can be a single card with a simple visual symbol to indicate a break, or a board with several visual symbols that represent different break choices. The break board can reduce anxiety and negative behavior.
- **Communication Books and Communication Strips.** These also help children to communicate without words. In book or strip format, they include picture cards with a variety of emotions and objects. Your child can point to a single picture that shows how he/she is feeling currently (scared, content, etc.) or he/she can place multiple picture cards in a series to form a phrase like “I’m okay” or “I need help.”

It is important for your child to learn how to use any visual supports or communication tools prior to visiting the dentist. If your child has never seen it before, he/she is likely not going to be able to use it at the visit. Preparation should begin a few weeks to one month prior to the dental visit.

Disclaimer: This information is provided for reference only. Consult your dentist before engaging in any procedures, practices, or treatments.

These tips were compiled from a variety of sources. For more tip sheets, visit www.fraser.org.

This document may be reproduced without change and in its entirety for training/educational purposes only without prior permission from Fraser. © Fraser 2011.