

# Creating Supportive Dental Environments: A Guide for Trauma-Informed Practices

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As a dental hygienist, a trauma-informed approach is essential for creating a supportive and patient-centered environment. This toolkit provides comprehensive guidelines and practical strategies to help dental hygienists—and the broader oral health team—understand and address the diverse impacts of trauma on patients. By fostering a calm and welcoming atmosphere, engaging in empathetic communication, and being mindful of each patient's unique experiences, dental hygienists can significantly enhance the overall patient experience. This approach not only improves health outcomes but also builds trust and strengthens long-term relationships between patients and oral health providers—ensuring more equitable, inclusive, and compassionate care across Canada.

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*By integrating trauma-informed care into everyday practice, we can break down barriers, reduce fear, and help every patient feel seen, heard, and safe.*

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## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is the physiological response triggered by events perceived as life-threatening and overwhelming. It's crucial to understand that the nervous system operates on an all-or-nothing basis, meaning the perceived threat doesn't necessarily have to be life-threatening—it only needs to be perceived as such. Trauma occurs when the nervous system cannot orient and respond appropriately to this perceived threat, whether internal or external. During a traumatic event, there is not enough time to orient oneself towards the threat and mobilize into survival response.

It's essential to recognize that trauma is a universal experience—it resides in the nervous system and affects us all. Trauma is cumulative, with its impacts accumulating within the nervous system over time. A traumatic event brings on an experience of loss of autonomy and a diminished sense of agency.

Categorizing trauma into four distinct types can offer a comprehensive understanding of its various forms. These categories include impact trauma, medical and dental trauma, relational trauma, and other trauma.

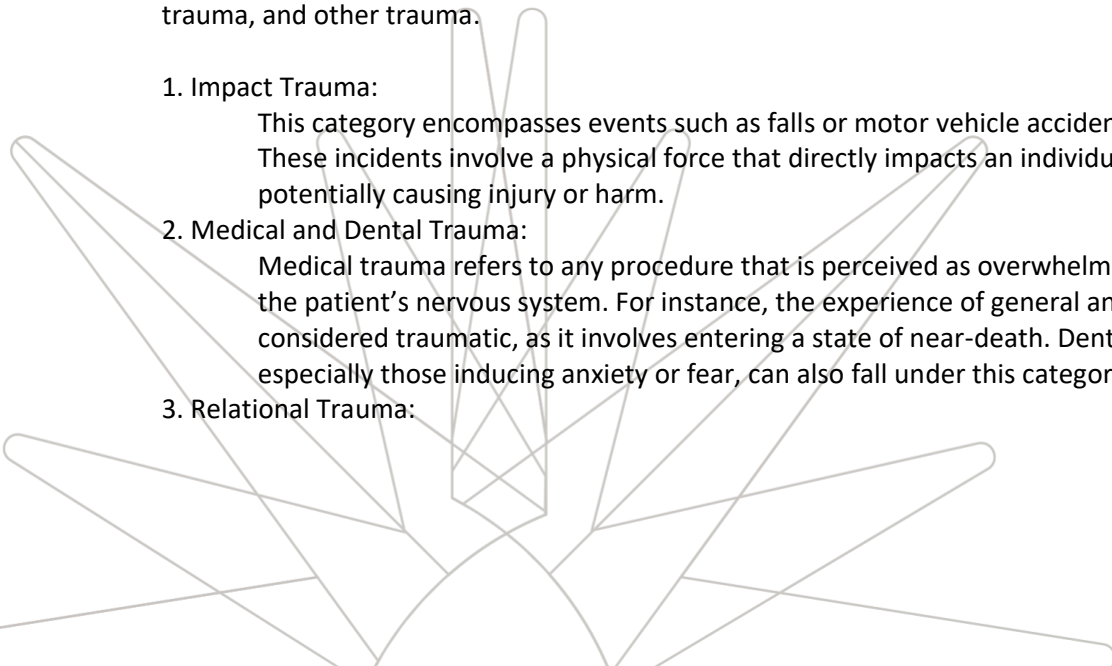
### 1. Impact Trauma:

This category encompasses events such as falls or motor vehicle accidents. These incidents involve a physical force that directly impacts an individual, potentially causing injury or harm.

### 2. Medical and Dental Trauma:

Medical trauma refers to any procedure that is perceived as overwhelming by the patient's nervous system. For instance, the experience of general anesthesia is considered traumatic, as it involves entering a state of near-death. Dental procedures, especially those inducing anxiety or fear, can also fall under this category.

### 3. Relational Trauma:



Relational trauma is a widely recognized form of trauma that involves disruptions in relationships. An example is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are traumatic events occurring in childhood and significantly affecting the individual's well-being.

#### 4. Other Trauma:

This category encompasses diverse events such as near-drowning or being electrocuted. These incidents may not fit neatly into the previous three categories and they are even more impactful traumatic experiences.

Understanding these four distinct categories provides a framework for comprehending the various facets of trauma, each with its unique characteristics and consequences.

### THE POLYVAGAL THEORY

Understanding the Polyvagal Theory, developed by Dr. Stephen W. Porges\*, is a pivotal tool in unravelling the intricacies of the nervous system's response to traumatic events and their enduring impact. We can simplify the Polyvagal Theory for understanding the autonomous nervous system by delineating it into three distinct states: social engagement, fight/flight response, and freeze response. In terms of its physiological components, these states correspond to the ventral vagal, sympathetic arousal, and dorsal vagal systems. The ventral vagal system is crucial in facilitating social engagement without triggering the fight or flight response.

When we are operating from the ventral vagal state, we have the capacity to be socially engaged. We experience emotional regulation. The ventral vagal system gets inhibited when we face a perceived threat in this event, the survival systems of sympathetic arousal or dorsal vagal take precedence.

The sympathetic system activates the well-known fight or flight response, preparing the body for rapid action. Conversely, if there's a perceived inability to overcome the threat, the dorsal vagal system intervenes by activating the dorsal vagal brake, inducing the freeze response—an instinctive reaction akin to feigning death.

Dr. Porges' Polyvagal Theory not only deepens our comprehension of these autonomic responses but also sheds light on how trauma disrupts the natural progression of the ventral vagal system, offering invaluable insights into the lasting consequences of traumatic experiences.

Understanding the intricacies of the brain can be simplified into three primary components: the rational thinking brain, the emotional brain, and the survival brain. In a state of social engagement, our nervous system grants us access to the entire spectrum of these cognitive functions. However, during survival modes like the fight/flight response or freeze response, our connection to the rational thinking brain diminishes, leaving us to navigate the situation with the more primal aspects of our brain.

Metaphorically, envision the nervous system as a container holding the residues of unresolved trauma. Everyone carries a unique container, varying in the extent to which it is filled with

experiences. For some, the container holds minimal experiences, resulting in a perception of the world as a safe and comfortable place. In contrast, others bear a container brimming with numerous experiences, leaving little room within. Consequently, their nervous system tends to shift more readily into the fight/flight or freeze response.

This metaphorical approach offers a tangible way to grasp how the accumulation of life experiences influences our responses to stressors. By acknowledging the amount contained in these metaphorical containers, we gain insights into why some individuals may more easily enter survival modes and how the level of traumatic events stored plays a significant role in shaping our neural responses. Illustrating how any dental experience can potentially register as traumatic for an individual with a full trauma container offers valuable insight into the nuanced workings of the nervous system.

When the rational brain has the capacity to overrule the survival brain, lying in the treatment chair beside the oral health professional (OHP) seems like a routine appointment. There's an awareness that tools & instruments will be utilized for necessary procedures, and the conscious decision to be there underscores the understanding of its health benefits. However, when the trauma container triggers a shift into survival mode, this seemingly routine scenario transforms into a situation of heightened vulnerability.

In this state, the patient finds themselves in a position where protection and self-defence become challenging, especially next to a relative stranger inserting tools into their mouth. Importantly, this survival experience is often subconsciously registered by the patient. The physical act of lying down in a supine position further amplifies vulnerability, making self-defence difficult. Additionally, placing objects in the mouth without the ability to close for protection contradicts the natural instincts associated with survival responses.

Adding another layer to this complex dynamic is the impact of past trauma, particularly impact trauma or relational trauma, which may have led to boundary ruptures. A boundary rupture, in essence, disrupts the neuroception, signalling a space is unsafe for the nervous system. Complicating matters, oral health providers often must operate in these boundary rupture areas to perform their work effectively. This proximity intensifies the challenge for the patient to maintain a regulated state during dental procedures.

Recognizing these intricacies sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the patient's experience and underscores the importance of trauma-informed approaches in dental care to create a more supportive and regulated environment for individuals with varying trauma histories.



## RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF DENTAL FEAR AND ANXIETY IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

Understanding and identifying signs of dental fear and anxiety can help oral health professionals provide more **trauma-informed, compassionate care**. While fear and anxiety are not the same as trauma, they may result from traumatic dental experiences—especially in early childhood or among patients with previous negative encounters in healthcare settings.

Below are some common signs to be aware of. This list is not exhaustive:

- Irregular attendance, cancellations, or frequent no-shows
- Aversion to being touched or discomfort with being approached
- Discomfort with sensitivity to an invasion of personal space
- Anxiety or nervous behaviours (e.g., fidgeting, excessive talking, sweating)
- Hypersensitivity, or exaggerated startle response
- Irritability, anger, or expressions of aggression
- Apathy or dissociation (appearing "checked out" or emotionally withdrawn)
- Unusual pain tolerance or detachment from discomfort
- Low self-esteem or to advocate for their care.
- Place a low value on oral health or dental care
- Engaging in Harmful oral habits (e.g., nail biting, bruxism)

## STARTING ON THE RIGHT FOOT

Initiating the patient's experience with the first contact at the dental clinic is pivotal, and the reception team plays a crucial role in establishing a positive foundation for this new relationship. To enhance this process, offering new patients the opportunity to receive their intake forms beforehand is recommended. This proactive measure allows patients to complete the necessary paperwork before their initial appointment, freeing their attention to absorb the new environment upon arrival. Reducing wait times in the waiting room is equally beneficial, contributing to a more positive experience and minimizing the potential for heightened anxiety. Additionally, ensuring a timely transition into the operatory further contributes to a seamless and efficient patient journey.

As the frontline, the reception team is the primary entry point. Adopting best practices, it is highly beneficial for the team to warmly greet patients upon arrival. When team members are engaged on the phone, even a simple visual acknowledgment can make patients feel seen and contribute to their overall sense of reassurance and well-being.

As an oral health professional, your role shapes the overall patient experience. It is essential to create an environment where patients feel acknowledged and cared for right from their first contact. Building a strong patient-provider relationship is crucial at every stage of their time in the clinic. Initiating a warm greeting in the waiting room and engaging in casual conversation as you walk together to the examination room are key components of establishing this connection. These interactions lay the foundation for effective communication throughout the appointment.

Extend this practice beyond your booked patients to anyone in the clinic. A friendly greeting fosters a welcoming atmosphere, contributing to a more relational environment, and helping individuals feel seen and at ease. This gesture sets a positive tone even if they are not initially scheduled with you. If the individual becomes your patient in the future, you've already initiated a positive relationship, setting the stage for a successful appointment for both the patient and you.

## INFORMED PRACTICE

Implementing trauma-informed practices in oral health care enhances the patient experience and contributes to a more compassionate and patient-centred approach. Recognizing that everyone has encountered some form of trauma in their life underscores the importance of providing care that is informed by trauma awareness.

Trauma-informed care involves acknowledging patients as whole individuals with unique life experiences that shape their reactions and interactions with the world. It requires understanding that a person's actions may deviate from perceived norms, prompting a curiosity about how best to support them in a dental setting.

Creating an environment that grasps the fundamentals of trauma and adapts its practices accordingly can significantly improve the patient's experience. Here are some practical steps:

1. Calm and Soothing Environment:
  - Utilize elements like music or TV shows to create a relaxed atmosphere.
2. Initial Appointment and Intake:
  - During the initial appointment, the oral health provider inquires about anxiety levels and makes notes for other team members.
  - Ask patients about any pertinent details regarding their oral health history.
  - Flag previous dental trauma in the patient's file.
3. Patient-Centered Conversations:
  - Oral health providers should appropriately engage patients in conversations about their anxiety levels and preferences for support.
  - Inquire about factors that would make the appointment more comfortable for the patient.
4. Communication and Flexibility:
  - Communicate changes of provider ahead of time, offering to rebook without a cancellation fee.
  - Before oral procedures, have a conversation with the patient, presenting a summary of the treatment plan. [Have the patient sitting up, avoid reclining the patient for this conversation.](#)
    - Be flexible with the pace of the procedure, allowing time for questions and adapting the treatment plan if necessary.
5. Non-Verbal Communication and Comfort Measures:
  - Establish a non-verbal communication code with the patient.
  - Offer a pillow for patients who may be anxious in the supine position.
  - Provide the option of a mirror to enhance visibility during procedures.
6. Responsive to Patient Signals:
  - Pay attention to non-verbal cues indicating anxiety and allow time for breaks.
  - Indicate special patient requirements on their chart for easy visibility by other practitioners.

Remember, fostering a sense of control and agency for the patient significantly contributes to a safer and more positive overall oral health experience. By incorporating these trauma-informed



practices, oral health care becomes not just a service but a thoughtful and supportive partnership between the patient and the healthcare team.

## UNDERSTANDING THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

There is a great deal of correlation between experiencing traumatic events and using coping strategies to cope with hypervigilance and being overwhelmed that can have a long-term negative impact on a person's physical and mental health (e.g., smoking, substance use, overeating, and high-risk sexual behaviour). It is important to engage with patients in a collaborative, non-judgmental fashion when discussing their habits and how it might be impacting their dental hygiene. It is important to remember that when a patient comes for oral health care, you are unaware of the person's situation and the degree of awareness or shame they experience regarding the state of their teeth and how they are coping with life stressors.

## THE ORAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

### Understanding your history and reactions

Recognizing the impact of a fuller trauma container is crucial, as individuals carrying such a burden often perceive the world as overwhelming and potentially threatening. In navigating our interactions, it becomes imperative to be cognizant of the experiences housed in our trauma containers. This self-awareness equips us to identify potential triggers—situations, behaviours, or emotions—and enhances our ability to navigate various scenarios, a skill especially valuable in patient care.

This heightened awareness proves essential when working with patients, particularly those grappling with extreme anxiety. For instance, if a patient's sudden anger during a procedure triggers a personal memory, it may create discomfort and challenge our focus on the task at hand. Understanding our triggers and acknowledging our reactions enable self-care, allowing a clear distinction between the present situation and past experiences. This, in turn, fosters a heightened awareness of our emotional landscape and the patients. Developing this level of self-awareness is a gradual process that may benefit from peer or professional support. Despite the time and effort required, the rewards extend beyond the professional realm into our personal lives.

In the context of patient care, the ["Taking the Pulse"](#) approach becomes invaluable. By proactively assessing each patient's unique needs and checking for flagged dental anxiety or trauma in their file, we pave the way for a more supportive and considerate approach. Engaging in open communication with the patient about how best to support them during procedures, without the need for explicit details about their experiences, contributes significantly to creating a positive and understanding patient experience. This proactive and compassionate approach underscores our commitment to patient-centred care and enhances the overall quality of their dental experience.

As an oral health professional, creating a supportive and positive experience for your patients involves various strategies that begin with your own self-regulation. Ensuring you are well-regulated, especially during busy workdays, is fundamental to supporting your patients effectively. Nonverbal cues about the state of your own nervous system can be picked up by

others, influencing their own states. Taking a moment for the [Body Sensation of Support/Easiest Breath exercise](#) throughout the day, as outlined in the [Tools section](#), can significantly contribute to your well-being and promote better regulation for your patients.

Building a strong patient-professional relationship is a cornerstone of enhancing the overall experience. For new patients, invest time in pre-treatment conversations outside the treatment chair. Create a comfortable space with a regular chair in the treatment room, ensuring you and the patient are seated during the conversation. Inquire about their dental history, discuss treatment plans, and collaboratively agree on nonverbal communication methods. Investing this time with the patient substantially increases the likelihood of a positive experience, potentially influencing their decision to return for regular appointments.

Curiosity about the patient's overall dental experience without delving into details is crucial. Openly discuss any anxiety they may be feeling, while empathizing and validating their emotions. Offer options to make the appointment more tolerable and ask for their preferences. This approach increases the chances of your patients being better regulated during the appointment, contributing to an overall positive experience.

Additionally, inquire about tools the patient may already use to manage anxiety, and if they lack such tools, take the time to teach them effective strategies. This helps with their anxiety and creates more physical space in the mouth for your work.

Once this conversation is complete, invite the patient to sit in the treatment chair, ensuring they are ready before transitioning to a supine position. During oral treatment, keenly observe nonverbal cues from the patient's face and body language. Be flexible in adapting your pace, offering breaks to ensure a comfortable and positive experience throughout the appointment. Your attentiveness to these details demonstrates a commitment to patient-centered care, fostering an environment where patients feel valued, understood, and well-supported.

## TOOLS

Implementing various techniques can significantly create a more relaxed and positive experience for patients during oral health procedures. Here are several strategies:

### 1. Body Sensation of Support / Easiest Breath:

- Teach patients to pay attention to body sensations and the easiest breath.

Practice with them by asking where their body feels supported by the chair and where their breath moves the easiest. This exercise can enhance their regulation and anxiety management throughout the appointment. **(Taking the time to coach people in this way will make the difference between the tool working or not.)**

- “Which part of your body is feeling supported by the chair right now?”
  - Your feet?
  - Your backside?
  - Your back?
- And what's the sensation there?
  - Is it sinking?

- Being held?
  - Warm?
  - "Would it be ok to notice that?" Give them a minute to notice the sensation.
  - "Where is your breath moving through the easiest?"
    - Through the nose?
    - The throat?
    - The chest?
  - "Would it be ok to notice that?" Give them a minute to notice the sensation.
  - And repeat as needed
2. Pleasant Topic Imagery:
- Encourage patients to pick a pleasing topic to think about during the procedure. Topics like memorable trips, enjoyable hobbies, or moments with pets can be discussed in detail to distract and comfort the patient.
3. Imagining Biting into Something:
- Invite patients to imagine biting into something satisfying, helping manage the natural discomfort of foreign objects in the mouth. This simple visualization can help manage the discomfort. "If you could imagine biting into the best object right now, what would you like to bite into? A crisp apple? A nice juicy peach? A rubbery ball? If that's ok, just imagine doing that."
4. Following Breath and Counting Breaths:
- Ask patients to identify where they can easily notice their breath (e.g. nose, mouth, lungs).  
Encourage them to follow their breathing or count breaths up to 10, providing a focal point for relaxation.
- Inhale: 1
  - Exhale: 2
  - Inhale: 3
  - ...
  - Exhale 10
- When they lose count, they restart to 1. If they get to 10, they restart to 1
5. Counting Down From 100 By 7:
- Challenge patients to count down from 100 by 7, providing a distracting task during the procedure.
6. Wiggling Toes:
- Invite patients to wiggle their toes and notice the details, promoting a grounded and mindful experience.
7. Stress Balls:
- Offer stress balls for patients to squeeze, providing a tactile outlet for stress.
8. Weighted Blanket:
- If available, provide a weighted blanket for added comfort. Ensure hygiene by using easily changeable covers.
9. Aromatherapy:
- Maintain a collection of calming essential oils and allow patients to choose one. A couple of drops on a tissue can create a soothing atmosphere.
10. Ear Buds with Music:



- Encourage patients to use their own earbuds to listen to music of their choice, creating a personalized and comforting auditory experience.

Integrating these techniques into your practice can significantly enhance the patient's comfort, making dental appointments a more positive and less stressful experience.

## WORKING WITH CHILDREN

When working with children who have personally experienced trauma or who have parents who have experienced trauma, establishing a thoughtful introduction protocol is paramount, especially when dealing with a child's first appointment. Consider initiating the process with an orientation appointment dedicated to building rapport, familiarizing them with the operatory, and introducing them to oral health tools.

For an optimal experience, it's advisable to refrain from any actual procedures during this initial appointment, particularly if the child has never undergone such procedures or has had negative prior experiences, unless the child feels completely comfortable. Instead, schedule a follow-up appointment for the following week. This approach allows the child ample time to absorb and integrate the information from the orientation session, significantly enhancing the likelihood of a positive and enduring experience.

Encourage the child to ask any questions about the upcoming appointment, fostering an open dialogue. Discuss how they can communicate the need to stop, introducing a simple non-verbal code, such as a thumbs-up for approval or raising the left hand if treatment needs to cease.

Incorporate breaks into the session, allowing the child to close their mouth, breathe normally, and gauge their comfort level. Additionally, guide them in recognizing their state and understanding what comes next. Keep the child informed about when they can move, offering a comforting distraction through an engaging television program or music. This thoughtful approach establishes a foundation of trust and communication. It sets the stage for a more relaxed and positive dental experience, laying the groundwork for a lifetime of better oral health encounters.

## WORKING WITH PARENTS

Fostering a positive and supportive environment with parents during their children's oral healthcare appointments involves a mindful and considerate approach. Here are some strategies to enhance the experience for both parents and children:

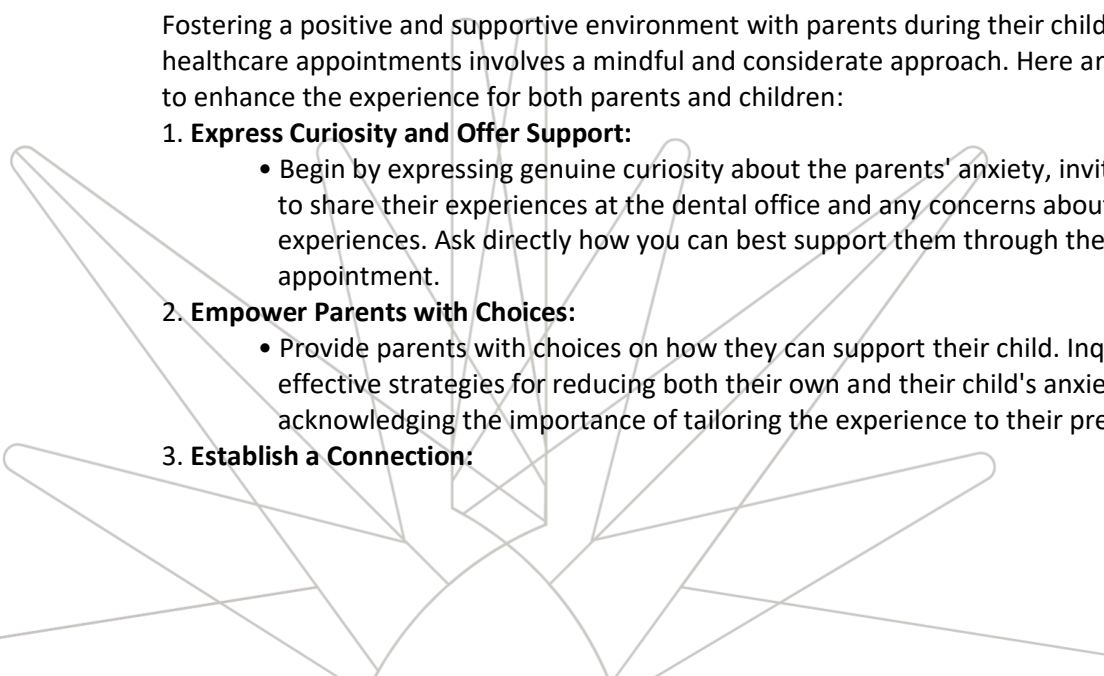
### 1. Express Curiosity and Offer Support:

- Begin by expressing genuine curiosity about the parents' anxiety, inviting them to share their experiences at the dental office and any concerns about their child's past experiences. Ask directly how you can best support them through the upcoming appointment.

### 2. Empower Parents with Choices:

- Provide parents with choices on how they can support their child. Inquire about effective strategies for reducing both their own and their child's anxiety, acknowledging the importance of tailoring the experience to their preferences.

### 3. Establish a Connection:



- Work intentionally to connect with the child, using their name and checking in with the parent. This fosters a sense of connection with the present moment, creating a more relaxed atmosphere.

**4. Transparent Communication:**

- Clearly explain to both the parent and child what will happen during the appointment, inviting them to ask questions at any point in the process. Transparent communication helps alleviate uncertainties and builds trust.

**5. Adapt to Anxiety or Distress:**

- If anxiety or distress increases in either the parent or child, be prepared to slow down or stop the process. Offer choices to both the parent and child, acknowledging their feelings. For example, if a child is in pain and the parent becomes anxious, pause to ask what would help the child and encourage slow, calming breaths.

**6. Consider Multiple Sessions:**

- Assess the situation and ask if breaking up the appointment into multiple sessions would be beneficial. This flexible approach acknowledges the unique needs of each parent and child, ensuring a more comfortable and manageable experience.

By incorporating these strategies, you can help foster an atmosphere of empathy, choice, and clear communication, creating a positive and supportive dental experience for both parents and their children. This guide highlights the importance of trauma-informed oral health care, offering practical approaches to building a safe, patient-centered environment. By recognizing and responding to the effects of trauma, dental hygienists and oral health team members can foster trust, improve patient outcomes, and enhance the overall well-being of those they serve. This approach ensures oral health care is effective, positive, and empowering, strengthening the relationship between patients and oral health providers.

A trauma-informed approach not only enhances the quality of care—it also empowers patients, strengthens provider relationships, and ensures that oral health care is inclusive, respectful, and truly effective.

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