

Let's Time it Right!

THE QUESTION

When is the best time to begin orthodontic treatment? This is a question that is often asked of me by parents, especially as they see other young children in orthodontic appliances. My specialty training in orthodontics at Baylor College of Dentistry placed emphasis both on early treatment (7-10 years old) as well as treatment occurring later when all of the permanent teeth are present.

MY ANSWER

A 2-phase approach to treatment is not a question of effectiveness; it is a matter of efficiency. I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to treat numerous patients using both a 2-phase and a single phase approach to treatment and then review them in the areas of finished results, patient compliance, duration of treatment, cost, and percentage of patients who require extractions. Combining this information with recent studies from the University of North Carolina, and new wire and appliance technology, in most cases a 2-phase approach has been shown to be less efficient and not more effective. I believe that for the vast majority of young patients, it is best to delay treatment until most, if not all, of the permanent teeth are in the mouth. My approach, as always, is to provide the right treatment, at the right time, for the right reasons.

THE REASONS

The four major advantages and benefits of *delaying* orthodontic treatment:

- 1) Decreased time in braces and fewer appointments, which results in:
 - Less chance of enamel decalcification and root shortening.
 - Less time absent from school
 - Less psychological burden (burn out)
- 2) Bone growth is occurring more rapidly during the adolescent years, increasing treatment effectiveness at that time.
- 3) In most cases, understanding and cooperation are enhanced when a child is more mature which improves patient compliance with braces care and oral hygiene.
- 4) Completing treatment in one comprehensive phase is less costly than a two-phase approach

The optimal time to realize these benefits will vary with each individual child, but for most children it is usually between the ages of 11 and 12. Orthodontic treatment started during this window of opportunity will usually result in braces being on for 18 to 24 months instead of 3 to 4 years, or more.

EXCEPTIONS

Having said all that, it is still recommended that a child should be seen by an orthodontist at about 7 years old because there are a few orthodontic conditions that do warrant a brief period of early treatment. These include:

- 1) Jaw imbalances which can cause unnatural jaw growth and deformity (such as a cross-bite or an upper jaw that is too far back)
- 2) Space maintenance for early loss of primary (baby) teeth or tooth impactions
- 3) Excessive crowding causing damage to teeth, bones, and/or gums
- 4) Teeth that are at risk of fracture by being too far forward.

Additionally, if a young patient is suffering psychologically or socially from crooked teeth, a brief period of partial braces can improve both the smile and self-image dramatically. Though braces will typically still be needed when all the permanent teeth erupt, **I do feel that this is a valid treatment indication for some children.**

PARTING WORDS

The timing of orthodontic treatment is an important issue that can make orthodontics either a rewarding and enjoyable experience or one that is prolonged and tedious. Our observation program is set up to allow us to evaluate the patient's dental and overall development on a regular basis. These regular observation visits allow us to begin orthodontic therapy at the appropriate and most efficient time for growing children.

I hope this information has given you a better understanding of our practice and a positive introduction to orthodontics. Sometimes waiting to start is the best "treatment." Please feel free to contact our office if we can assist you with any additional questions