



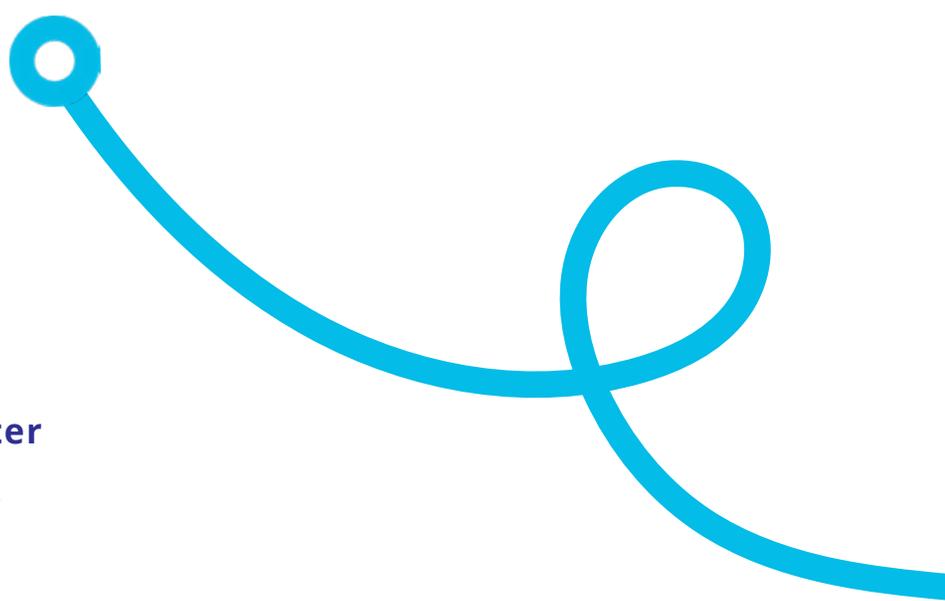
GUIDE



7 Ways To Optimize Communication with Patient Caregivers

**Connect Meaningfully with Families
& Support Communities**

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Introduction:

Everyone is entitled to great oral healthcare.

However, not every patient has the same experience of going to the dentist. As you serve different types of patients, you will often have to be working with your patients' support networks - that is, any person responsible for the main patient's dental care. This can cause communication issues. Consequently, these issues require strategizing and understanding from your staff.

In this guide, we will discuss 7 considerations for optimizing communication with your patients' support networks.

But let's answer this important question: what kinds of support networks will you encounter with your patients?



What Kinds of Support
Networks Do You Encounter?



What Kinds of Support Networks Do You Encounter?

The world is full of diverse family structures and support networks that encompass friends, employed caregivers, and more. Often, when we talk about families in dentistry, we are talking about two parents who are married with children. But, while this family structure is both commonplace and important, there are many other families and community networks that exist to support patients.

Take into account, for example, that the baby boomer population is becoming elderly¹, and more and more young people are choosing not to have children². The team at your dental practice or oral surgery will only encounter more situations involving elder care, or support networks involving non-family members.

An important thing to note here is that these non-family members, if they are an important part of the patient's support network, often need to be treated like family by dental staff.

If you are going to create optimal communication for patient support networks, you need to have a good understanding of what some of these support networks look like. Let's talk about some different examples of support networks that you might encounter.



What Kinds of Support Networks Do You Encounter?

Minor Children and their Parents or Guardians

Communicating with the parents and guardians of dental patients is a skill that many dental practices already possess. This is an instance where the patient themselves is not the final decision-maker, and is also not your primary point of contact³.

One important consideration is, if the parents or guardians are divorced, are both adults in your contact database? If not, this can cause complications for dental practices. Finding an optimal way to communicate with the minor child's entire support network is important. A guardian in this instance might also include a temporary state-sanctioned adult for a child who is in foster care or in a group home, who is not a full legal guardian.

Maintaining sensitivity to different family and support networks for children is key to ensuring that the patient receives optimal care.



What Kinds of Support Networks Do You Encounter?



Elderly Patients with Caregivers

Often, the caregivers of elderly patients will be a member of their family, usually an adult child. However, caregivers can also be a neighbor or someone employed by the elderly patient to provide assistance.

In this instance, it will be important to communicate with the patient themselves, as well as the caregiver who is assisting them. Ensuring your practice understands the relationship between the patient and their caregiver (family member, care aid, etc.)

Sometimes, elderly patients will struggle to remember instructions or key details for their appointments. Part of optimal communication will mean ensuring that their caregiver also has those details.

What Kinds of Support Networks Do You Encounter?

Patients with Disabilities

This kind of support network is unique, in some ways, because the patient may be any age. In addition, disability comes in many forms, and it's possible that the patient's support network will reflect that.

For example, depending on the type of disability that the patient lives with, your practice may be communicating with both the patient and their caregiver(s), or just with the caregivers⁴. It is also possible, in some cases, that you will just be communicating with the patient, but with the knowledge that a caregiver may attend the appointment with them. Be sure to ask respectful and specific questions about how to communicate with this patient and their support network.

Patients with Non-Family Support Networks

Often, patients do not have close relationships with their family of origin, but will have chosen family support networks that are usually composed of close friends or community members. What is important to remember in this example is that these support networks are just as important to the patient - sometimes more so - than their family of origin. If your patient tells you that their friend is going to accompany them to an appointment as a support person, ask respectful clarifying questions about whether or not that friend needs to be included in communication.



What Kinds of Support Networks Do You Encounter?



What to Understand About Support Networks

The important takeaway about your patients' support networks is that they will look different from each other. And, they will each need their own version of optimal communication⁵.

Let's discuss some tactics for providing that optimal communication to each of your patients and their support networks.

Understanding the differences between the support networks will enable you to create that plan for optimal communication.

What Kinds of Support Networks Do You Encounter?

Examples of Support Networks You Might Encounter:

1. Minor Children and their Parents or Guardians
2. Elderly Patients with Caregivers
3. Patients with Disabilities
4. Patients with Non-Family Support Networks



Strategizing for Communication with Patient Support Networks



Strategizing for Communication with Patient Support Networks

Here are seven considerations when creating your communication strategy with patient support networks.

#1: Clarify Preferred Contacts

Clarify early on who the preferred contacts for this patient is. Is it the patient themselves, in addition to their caregivers? Just their caregivers? As we've seen in our different examples, knowing the point of contact is essential to understanding and catering to the unique needs of dental patients who require caregivers is essential.

#2: Use Their Preferred Method of Communication

It's important to recognize that effective communication lies at the heart of this relationship - connecting with patients and their support networks in a manner that respects their preferences and ensures clarity is paramount. It is important to message all caregivers so that everyone is on the same page, such as the divorced parents of a minor child or the adult children of an elderly patient who have power of attorney. Do your best to accommodate the preferred communication of our patients and their caregivers by offering them the option of text, email, or phone.



Strategizing for Communication with Patient Support Networks



#3: Find the Right Messaging Sequence

When reaching out to dental patients and their caregivers, it's imperative to consider the flow of the messaging. Craft an optimal messaging sequence that conveys the necessary information without overwhelming the recipient. Aim to share pertinent details succinctly and in a logical order that follows the patient's care timeline. By doing so, you enhance communication effectiveness, ensuring that every message delivered is relevant.

#4: Get Your Patients to Your Practice - Easily

One key element of this optimal communication is providing them with everything they need to know about transportation and parking. This is an important part of making your practice easy to find. However, this will be important also in terms of supplying accessibility information. Is your practice wheelchair accessible? How many stairs are there to your front door? Is it easy to drop someone off outside? Is there noisy construction taking place next door? This is all important information to supply.

Strategizing for Communication with Patient Support Networks

#5: Leverage Digital Forms

An important accessibility feature that your dental practice or oral surgery can offer, if possible, is the digital form. Certainly, this is a feature that is useful for any patient. Especially if the patient in question relies on their caregiver(s) or support network for a high number of logistical tasks, it will be helpful to everyone not to have a hardcopy form to bring home, fill out, and then remember to bring back. A digital form allows your patient and/or their caregivers to fill the form out on their own time, with the form readily accessible in their email inbox or text message history.



Strategizing for Communication with Patient Support Networks

#6: Provide A Meaningful In-Office Experience

Communicating with support networks remotely is important - but the in-office experience must match it for thoroughness, respect, and efficiency. Offer training or coaching to your staff on how they can respectfully communicate with patients and caregivers. If you have a communication policy, make sure they know it!⁶ Ensure that your staff has the right information available to know what each patients' unique situation is - and approach that unique situation with professionalism and integrity.

In addition, know what to offer your patients so that they feel comfortable! Many of your patients who have caregivers may need access for disability, such as a wheelchair accessible treatment room or noise-canceling headphones. Explore ways that your office space can be welcoming for every patient.

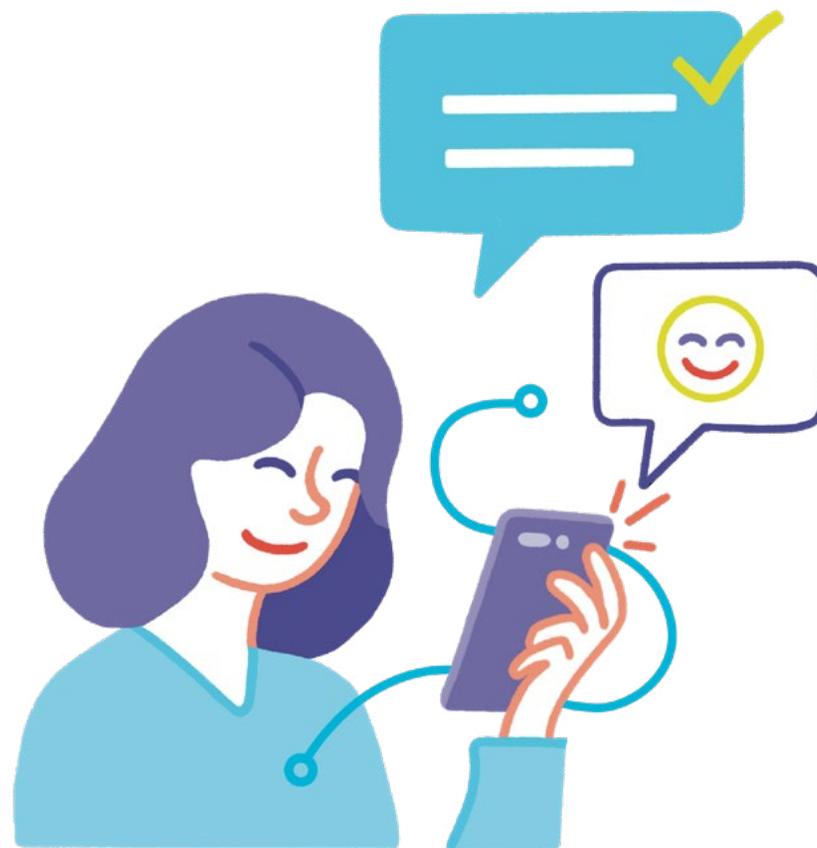


Strategizing for Communication with Patient Support Networks

#7: Explaining Treatment & Payment Options Early

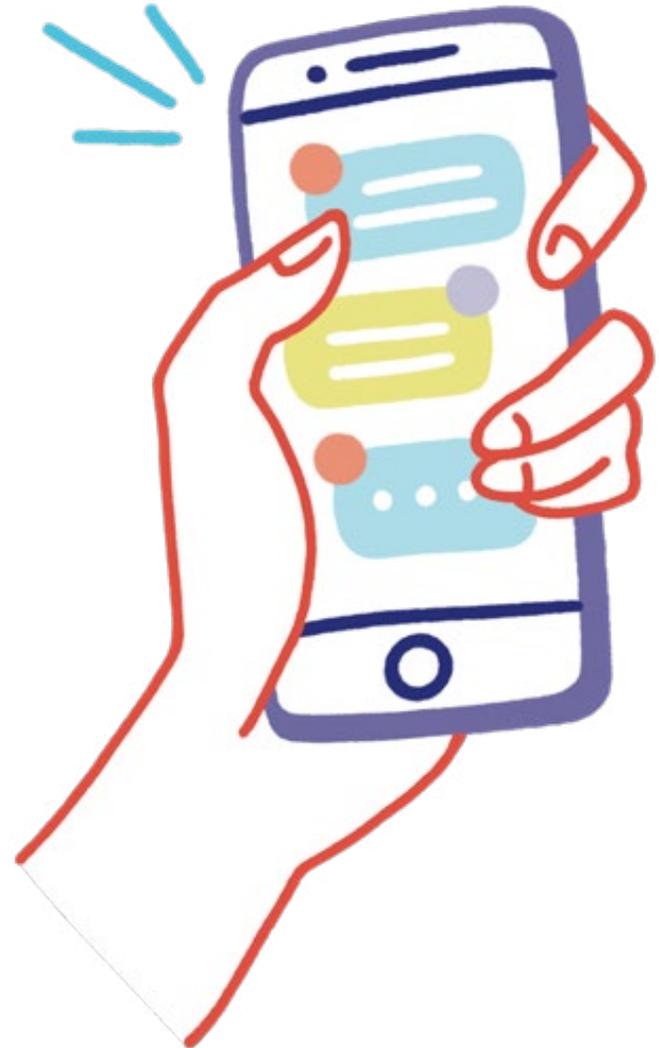
One of the most important pieces of communication with your patients, regardless what kind of support network they have, is to explain treatment and payment options early, from the beginning⁷. A challenge with communicating with both patients and/or caregivers is making sure everyone is on the same page. Some ways to communicate this thoroughly include:

- As always, ensure you are communicating by their preferred methods - text, email, or phone
- Check in early about who needs to receive this information, and ensure that that information is included in the patient's file
- Communicate possible treatment and payment options verbally, as well as remotely
- If the caregiver is present at an appointment, ask them if they have received the information



Your 7 Tips for Communicating with Patient Support Networks

1. Clarify preferred contacts
2. Use their preferred method of communication
3. Find the right messaging sequence
4. Get Your Patients to Your Practice - Easily
5. Leverage Digital Forms
6. Provide a meaningful in-office experience
7. Explaining Treatment & Payment Options Early



Creating the Best Dental Practice Possible

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