First impressions can be important. Since your pediatric waiting room is the first perception your pint-sized patients (and their parents) have of your practice, what impression does it make? Is it inviting, comfortable, and serene or scary enough for kids to start crying and parents become irritated upon entering?

Take 15 minutes to go sit in each waiting room in your practice and carefully scrutinize. Are there stains on the furniture? Have the baseboards and windows been cleaned recently? What do you hear…and smell? Would you be hesitant to touch the furniture? Can you sit comfortably in one of the chairs for 15 minutes? Are the reading materials outdated and tattered? Would you let your child get down on the floor? Anything to keep a child distracted while they wait?

Opinions are formed from what kids and parents see, hear, and smell when they walk through the entrance door. Believe it or not, patient satisfaction with your practice is most often based on little details you might not even be aware of such as interaction with staff, perceived wait time, and waiting room accommodations. No matter how skilled you are as a physician, dentist, or orthodontist, excellent care may be overshadowed by your office atmosphere.

Inferior waiting rooms have long topped the list of patient complaints about their care. Since a sizeable portion of time is spent waiting, physical and psychological comfort should be considered in your waiting room design. It is also important to remember that a child’s perception is as important as parental observations and should be addressed in the design of the room.

While a wait-free healthcare model does not exist, providing the proper waiting room environment plays a greater role in the waiting experience than does reducing wait time. According to research by Alyssa Robling in *The Effects of Waiting Room Appearance on Patient Satisfaction*, the physical attributes of the waiting area does influence the patient’s opinion of the physician and should not be ignored. ¹

**Which Attributes are Important?**

Since waiting room physical attributes do affect a patient’s perception, which attributes are are important? According to the 2004 report, *The Role of the Physical Environment in the Hospital of the 21st Century: A Once-in-a-Lifetime Opportunity*, by Roger Ulrich and Craig Zimring, there are five key tenets essential in patient psychological well-being. ²

The attributes or five tenets of healing design simply stated are:

- Access or Connection to Nature
- Positive Distractions
- Greater Sense of Control in their Environment
- Social Support Spaces
- Reduction or Elimination of Environmental Stressors

All five tenets can be incorporated into any budget, providing an aesthetically pleasing environment which not only reduces anxiety level of patients, it also increases staff effectiveness as well-being is promoted throughout the facility. But, do these five tenets apply to pediatrics? Are there specific qualities more important than others in a pediatrics waiting room?
Qualities of Excellent Pediatric Waiting Rooms

Yes, these tenets do apply to pediatrics practices! In fact, there are seven specific qualities within the five tenets that, if incorporated, will enhance a child’s perception of your office as well as promoting their well-being. The seven excellent qualities can be included in many different ways. How they are included will be determined by the specific nature, location, and size of your practice.

Obviously, needs for a general pediatrics office will differ from pediatric orthopedics, dentistry, orthodontics, or other specialty office. Private practice requirements will be different from hospitals, surgical centers, or urgent care facilities. Additionally, each practice must decide if the waiting area should be designed for peaceful, passive activities or lively, information seeking activities. Listed below are the seven qualities to consider:

Focus on Positive Distractions –
What is meant by positive distraction? “A positive distraction has been defined as ‘an environmental feature that elicits positive feelings and holds attention without taxing or stressing the individual, thereby blocking worrisome thoughts.’”3 Since children are accompanied by at least one adult, and often other siblings, the purpose of distraction in pediatrics is two-fold, addressing both children and adults.

Children may be fearful of procedures or people, or feeling pain, discomfort, restlessness or fatigue. While in your office, parental concerns may range from the health issue needing attention to controlling children’s behavior to any miriad of daily family problems on their mind. Offering something unexpected as a diversion from the immediate ailment occupies the mind and stirs curiosity. This often results in behavioral change, easing anxiety and discomfort.

Possible positive distractions can be:

• Interactive floors and walls – such as projected images on floor or wall that respond to body movement, magnetic games, funhouse mirrors, and touchscreen game terminals.

• Art gallery – sculpture, photography, paintings, murals, and prints, rotated periodically by local artisans or through other programs. Keeps office environment fresh and gives patients something new to look at during subsequent visits.

• Video theater – with short duration shows (for short attention span and short wait time), in a corner or alcove, separate but near adults.

• Aquarium – provides an ever changing display, movement that interests all ages (sick or well), and soothing sound of moving water.

• A treasure chest – with individually packaged items to take home is an alternative to loose toys. Helps maintain infection control as well a provide distraction.

• Books, magazines, informational materials – long time staple of waiting rooms, still useful but keep them organized, not scattered about; clean, not dog-eared and torn; recent and have a variety.

Loose toys, internet access, and multiple televisions are not the best distractions. Parents generally provide toys for small children to avoid germ-sharing and many also have internet access via personal smart phones. Television programs do not have universal interest, nor is sound level agreeable to all. Best to leave the TV to the video theater; toys and computer games to parents.

Create a Feeling of Welcome, Safety, and Security –
Imagine a world where everything is taller than you. Welcome to a child’s world! To create a feeling of welcome, safety, and security for a child, the waiting room needs to be viewed from a their perspective, so while scrutinizing your waiting room, get down to a child’s eye level and look at what they see. Scary? Can be if you are under three feet tall. Increase a child’s feeling of security by reducing counter height and other structural elements to a child’s level.

Now look at the transition between waiting room, reception, and exam rooms. Is it easy to maneuver with multiple children in tow or does room change cause a spike in anxiety? Can patients see beyond the door? Unsettling surprises cause anxiety for patients so reduce the scare factor by providing transparency between spaces. Transparency also encourages a welcome environment when staff seems available and not hidden behind solid doors or cold, glass windows that screech when opened.
Knowing where to go should be intuitive, without onerous signage (which usually goes unread). Architectural elements such as different floor materials, placement of different colors, and lighting should easily guide the eye to each stopping point.

Parents appreciate a childproof environment so secure the waiting room the way parents do at home. Remove sharp objects, cover electrical outlets, eliminate tripping hazards, and avoid furniture with sharp corners. Instead of a coffee table, use a large, cushioned ottoman. Install wall sconces instead of using table lamps.

**Use Comfort to Reduce Stress Factors**

If patients are uncomfortable in the waiting room, it will continue as stress and anxiety into exam rooms. Discomfort can be caused by many factors, but the waiting room should not be one of them. Here are some problem areas and solutions:

- Avoid arranging chairs around the room’s perimeter or in long rows – people on one side must stare at strangers. Instead, place chairs in easily rearranged vignettes, conversational groupings, or in alcoves for a bit of privacy.
- Provide places for wheelchair patients to park in the same seating area as everyone else, along the wall instead of on display in the middle of the room. The room should be easy for all to maneuver.
- Use loveseats or bariatric chairs allowing a parent to comfortably hold a child while waiting or to provide for obese visitors.
- Child-sized furniture comes in various sizes and should be age appropriate. Select from commercial manufacturers who provide a stable, safe product able to withstand heavy use.
- Seating should be comfortable, easy to get in and out of, and be sufficient in number for busiest wait times.
- Monitor waiting room temperature. Too hot or too cold equals irritable child and cranky parent.
- Vary light levels to negate any institutional feeling and reduce eye fatigue.
- Providing restrooms and a water fountain nearby are a must in pediatrics. Kids are forever thirsty or needing to “go”.

**Keep it Calm and Serene Through Sound**

Calm, serene environments begin with sound and greatly influences behavior, reducing chaos (a major contributor to staff and patient stress). Even in a pediatrics waiting room, serenity is an easily deliverable quality. If you want a calm waiting room, control the sound.

Remove inane chatter caused by blaring televisions and annoying generic music. No infomercials, no educational shows and certainly no news, which can produce negative emotions. Also, no overhead paging (which has to be loud to be noticed by patients anyway). Business office phones and chatter should be away from the area or controlled. Recommend patients only use cell phones to text or for games instead forcing one-sided conversations on everyone.

Hard surfaces amplify while soft materials reduce noise, so combine both for good acoustics. Upholstery, carpeting, and acoustic ceiling tiles are the largest sound absorbers in waiting rooms. Music playing softly in the background can mask unwanted noise. Sounds from nature such as birds chirping, rustling leaves, and crickets on a summer night are calming. Sounds of moving water may be soothing, but may also stimulate excessive trips to the restroom.

**Relate Room to Nature**

Nature themed rooms have been shown to have a positive impact on healing and aquariums are top on the list. Children are fascinated by living creatures, so be sure the aquarium has a closed system to avoid “extra feedings” by little hands. Planters with rocks, trees, flowers, and green foliage also soothe the senses. Genuine works best but figurative will do if space is tight.

Pleasant views of nature also make people feel better. Windows with an interesting natural view of the outdoors should be included in every pediatric waiting area. If an outdoor view is not possible, put the TV to good use.
showing an endless loop of nature scenes. Other alternatives include large framed paintings, photographs, or murals depicting nature.

Natural light is always most desirable, adjusting as time passes, working with human circadian rhythms. Leave windows uncovered when possible. If heat or glare is an issue, apply window tint or use translucent shades to allow natural light to penetrate but the view to remain. No daylight available? Mimic daylight by using timers on available light fixtures. Avoid using 2x4 fluorescent ceiling fixtures when possible. (They actually make patients look worse!)

Visual warmth and comfort is also achieved through use of wood flooring, furniture, and other finishes. New materials on the market specifically designed for healthcare use can be cleaned without damaging surfaces. Check with a reputable healthcare interior designer to be sure natural materials selected are durable.

**Spotlessly Clean, Easy to Maintain –**

Appearances are important to your patients. If your waiting room is fresh, new, clean, and well maintained, patients assume their care will be also. Stained carpet, threadbare chairs, and faded artwork cause patients to wonder about the care they will receive and opulence raises questions about where their money is being spent, so strike a happy medium somewhere inbetween.

Most importantly, a pediatric waiting room should be spotless. Durable, washable surfaces that are not only manufactured for commercial use, but healthcare-grade will result in easier maintenance. Both maintenance and replacement costs will be lower when furnishings and finishes last longer.

Cleanliness and maintenance apply not only to the room (floors, walls, ceiling, counters, etc.), furnishings and accessories, but also to the distractions provided. Interactive games, activities, and toys should easily wipe clean to maintain infection control. Fewer parts, smooth flat surfaces, and washable surfaces are best. Any books supplied that will be handled by sick children should be cleanable.

**Sick + Well + Teen + Private -**

Providing separate waiting rooms for sick and well children has an obvious benefit. Whether this actually retards the spread of bacteria and viruses or not, parents perceive it does help maintain a sterile environment. Passing through a room full of sneezing, coughing, feverish kids is not what parents arriving for well-child exams want to experience. A secondary entrance / exit provides psychological safety and privacy for parents.

In the mind of a teen, pediatrics equals “baby doctor”. Children who have grown up under your care who are now teenagers may not be ready to switch to another doctor, but they may be reluctant to wait in a room designed for babies, toddlers, and small children. Allocating space for teen-oriented activities will encourage them to better utilize office care.

With HIPPAA laws in place, space for private conversations is required. Privacy during check-in and check-out should also be considered. Entrance into the treatment area (and restrooms) should be out of direct view of the waiting room. Patients being watched as they go in for treatment creates the feeling of being in a fish bowl instead of privacy.

**Surveys Provide Valuable Feedback**

If you really want to know what your patients think about your pediatric waiting room, ask them. Periodically give surveys to your patients to fill out while they wait. Rate of return is usually 100% and patients are impressed you asked for their opinion. To parents, it shows you really care about their child.

In researching this report, mothers were asked for feedback on BEST and WORST features of their pediatric waiting rooms. Here are a few responses:

“*Fish tank. Large high TV's with a variety of kids Disney movies controlled by the receptionist. Daylight. Visual/glass separation between the sick kids, well kids and infants. Vinyl floor tiles. No carpet. Comfortable chairs and double chairs where you can sit and hold a child. Vending machines. Clean new Free parenting magazines. Educational posters of body parts as a talking point. Example: the parts of an ear.*”
"The toys aren't kept clean. The books are beat up and germy. The little Tykes Play House, play rugs and little tykes chairs started out new, cute and clean, but need to be replaced on a frequent basis. 2 years and they look like a mess. Books need to be replaced monthly. They need to be cleaned and turned over like a day care. There needs to be a larger sick kid area. More boxes of kleenex. More physical separation between family seating groups. More hand sanitizer. Bathroom off of the waiting area with full view. A step stool at the water fountain or NO waterfountain with a cooler and cups...spit and mouths all over it..ick. Colors need to be calm rather than invigorating. Chalk boards sound like a good idea, but they are a mess and the kids suck on the erasers. Kids mouth things."

"I second the icky toys! And better separation between well kids and sick kids. I'd let my son play with toys if I could easily wipe them down first. I usually just bring books and toys with me. Our pediatrician's office is pretty good. If I could change anything it would be to have a separate little waiting room for sick kids. They keep them separate but you walk by the sick ones to see the doctor. They always have it decorated cute for kids which I do love! "

Realize the Intangible Benefits

Granted, you will not be able to please everyone and creating an excellent pediatric waiting room may be more expensive than your run-of-the-mill waiting room. However, it need not be costly, especially if you work with a design firm who has expertise in healthcare interiors. Knowledgeable specialists save your practice money in the long-term by selecting furniture, finishes and materials that withstand the demands placed on healthcare facilities.

Once your waiting room measures up, keep it that way by conducting regular inspections. Light inspections, performed quarterly, can be completed by your facility manager. Full inspections done annually by an interior designer can prevent wear and tear from becoming substantial damage.

More importantly, the intangible benefits are what really matter. What patients communicate to others about their pleasant waiting experience will far out weigh any added expense…and they will talk to others about your practice. Moms rely on referrals from friends when selecting healthcare for their children. Healthcare providers that provide a clean, serene, and relaxing waiting room where parents can collect their thoughts and where kids have positive distractions prior to examination or procedure will be appreciated. News of your practice will, in marketing terms, go viral….and positive referrals are a “virus” worth having. A thoughtfully designed, excellent pediatric waiting room is worth the investment.

Jeanette Simpson, ASID, Interior Designer and owner of KidSpace Interiors, specializes in design of spaces specifically for children, including healthcare, hospitality, and residential design. In addition to providing design services, Jeanette has written numerous articles on children’s room design and designs furniture for a high-end children’s furniture company. For more information on Pediatric Waiting Room Evaluations and Inspections, contact Jeanette at jsimpson@kidspaceinteriors.com.

Footnotes:
1 Alyssa Robling, The Effects of Waiting Room Appearance on Patient Satisfaction, Department of Psychology, Boise State University, Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Conference, 2009.