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# Non-Compliant Patients — How To Win Without A Battle!

## A Monthly Article on Practice Management

*Presented by Dr. Roger P. Levin and Ortho Technology, Inc.*

“How should we manage non-compliant patients and families?” This is one of the most common questions Levin Group receives from orthodontic management and marketing clients. It is a widespread concern — and an even larger one than most orthodontists realize because non-compliance includes far more than they realize.

The non-compliant patient often brings to mind a child who does not successfully maintain his or her oral health care. As frustrating as these issues are, non-compliance encompasses much more than that. The definition of non-compliance needs to be expanded to also include:

- Patients who do not keep appointments*
- Patients who are late for appointments*
- Patients/parents who do not pay*

Now, non-compliance takes on even greater significance. When patients/parents have already agreed to treatment, the orthodontic office faces the challenge of how to handle the situation.

### 1. Patients who do not keep appointments

No-shows or last-minute cancellations are essentially the same thing. When patients provide just a few minutes notice that they are not coming, the end result is no different than a no-show. With only a few minutes before the appointment time, the practice has no opportunity to fill in the empty time. Since orthodontic offices are often very busy, especially in the afternoons, no-shows and last minute cancellations tend to go unresolved.

When patients fail to show up, they are using time that cannot be reappointed, which means not only lost production but also the inevitability of overdue debonds. One of the most serious issues for orthodontic practices today is the large number of overdue debonds, which are clogging up the schedule and making it more difficult to fit in new patients. As every orthodontist knows, practice production depends on a healthy, consistent influx of new patients.

No-shows and last-minute cancellations need to be addressed immediately. Levin Group targets less than a 1% no-show/last-minute cancellation rate for its clients, who regularly achieve this goal once proper protocols are in place. How do they do this? After two no-shows or last-minute cancellations in the past year, a conference takes place with the parent(s) explaining that it may be necessary to debond the orthodontic patient. It is also explained that the patient can begin again at any time but the practice would require payment of the entire fee. The practice should be very clear that it does *not* want to take this step. However, the practice can only provide quality care if patients keep appointments.

This message is so effective that no-shows and last-minute cancellations rarely continue after a discussion with the families. Keep in mind that excellent scripting makes handling this situation easy.

### 2. Patients who are late for appointments

There are two ways to handle patients who are not prompt. The first is to identify all late patients and schedule them 20 minutes early for appointments. After a patient has been late by more than 10 minutes twice in a row, this step should be invoked. The second step is to send a parent or patient home without being seen on that given day.

Certainly no orthodontist wants to take the second step, which causes a no-show. However, it is often a powerful message in helping parents understand that the practice takes not showing on time for appointments seriously. There are instances when inefficiencies should be tolerated if an ongoing issue (such as a consistently late patient) can be resolved. Once again, this dramatic step virtually eliminates the issue among chronically late patients.

### 3. Patients/parents who do not pay

This form of non-compliance can prove devastating to the collections process. Why don't they pay? Here are two key reasons:

- **With a tighter economy, people are putting off ortho payments.** Why? Because if the practice is extending the payment plan, there is no attached interest as with credit cards. They also aren't worried about losing a home like they would be if mortgage payments weren't being made.
- **More Americans are living off their credit cards.** When these individuals reach their credit limit, they have to pay down their balances before they can use their card again. All patients who are one day overdue for payment should receive a call. They should then receive calls on a weekly basis until the payment has been made. These calls can be made in a positive, constructive way without seeming intimidating to patients. To reach patients more effectively, calls should be made to cell phones, when possible.

Once people discover that the practice will be diligent about collecting overdue money, they will often find a method to pay it. This is especially true because parents obviously want to take the best care of their children. No parent really wants to take braces off due to missing payments in the practice. If a family has missed two payments, then a carefully scripted conference needs to take place once again about the potential of debonding.

While the practice usually *never* has to actually take this step, it does send a powerful message that typically resolves the situation. In the event that there are families that simply cannot continue their payments, patient financing with an outside company is an excellent option. Traditional orthodontic payment plans where patients/parents make payments on a regular basis concurrent with treatment are becoming more and more challenging to manage. While these methods worked 10 or 20 years ago, they are not as successful today.

### Conclusion

Non-compliance goes far beyond patients who do not follow home-care recommendations. Highly successful orthodontic practices made it a priority to identify *all* non-compliance factors. Then, design systems and protocols with accompanying scripting to rectify the issue(s).

Non-compliance issues can be difficult for practices to deal with. Remember that the goal of non-compliance is not to win the battle, but to win *without* a battle. Healthy, respectful practice/patient relations can still be maintained at the highest level when these situations are properly handled.



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## Building TOTAL PRACTICE Success™

Our commitment is to help every orthodontist grow regardless of the economy. Every orthodontic practice has the potential to transform into A Levin Practice™ and anticipate these results:

- Continually increasing production
- Continually increasing profit
- Continually increasing referrals
- A low stress practice environment
- High levels of professional satisfaction
- Reaching financial independence sooner

Our consulting programs are based on proven systems and strategies that have delivered successful results to thousands of practices for more than 24 years. Levin Group Consulting Programs are the established benchmark for practice management excellence in our profession.