

Rex Features

# Dispensing to children

Offering a comprehensive service to children can bring long-term benefits to your business. **James Dawson** considers the issues around dealing with children in practice

**H**ow often do you see children in practice? Do you have a good child patient base? Do you allocate time and resources to them? Do you see them as an integral part of the business or as a hassle? All these questions could help highlight potential growth areas for your business, increase patient loyalty and encourage more patients through the door.

Most of us, if we are honest, see paediatric dispensing as a loss leader or a bit of a waste of effort. We often don't help children choose their frames, instead letting the parents perform this role, and we only seem to show the free range or the low cost options, let alone actually mentioning lens types and coatings. As a result, children's eyewear and how it is managed tends to be a little hit and miss in many practices.

As a parent it is hard not to look at children's spectacles and question the worth of spending the money as children often mistreat their frames. As a dispenser it is easy to assume this attitude too, and think, well we know they will be back for numerous repairs, adjustments, they will grow out of them quickly, we will be

recalling them again in three months, six months, a year and the parents won't want to pay for anything anyway.

All these are valid points, but would we treat an adult's dispense in the same way? Or would we try to offer products that are more expensive, that don't break as easily, need less attention to keep them from being damaged and broken, need fewer adjustments, and which will be easy to replace lenses if we need to see them more frequently? Do we bother to look at whether they will pay the price before they even walk through our doors?

Preconceptions on paediatric eyewear and care vary considerably, with most practices not catering for children as well as they could, maybe as they perceive that the multiples have got that sector all wrapped up. However, some practices are succeeding in the paediatric sphere and they are reaping the benefits of having a higher number of children on their books. Those who do it well benefit from repeat business, even if only while going through the child's formative years and if they only spend the equivalent to an NHS voucher then it still all adds up over time. But

imagine if you were actually able to dispense a premium product, whether that be a frame, a lens type or even a coating.

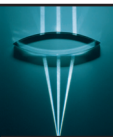
From a personal point of view, I choose my own children's eyewear as I would choose my own. I treat it that they have to wear the frames a lot and they want them to look fashionable. I want them to be hard wearing, to offer good vision, and I also want to have sunglasses to protect their eyes, all of which should fit well and be of a good quality that will last. Do I want to pay a lot? No. Do I mind paying a little extra to get these benefits? Absolutely not, they are my kids and I am happy to get them something that is value for money.

So what can we do to improve the way we view children's eyewear?

### Frames

Do you have a good selection? Are you catering for all ages or just the younger end of the market? Suppliers like Continental with its Lazer range and Dunelm with Whiz Kids offer a great selection of neat, small children's frames.

Teenagers are more fashion-conscious than ever, and so are their parents. We think nothing of buying



the expensive trainers or clothes; after all we want our kids to fit in and be trendy. So why would spectacles be different?

It's not easy to find a cheap branded range that will fit teenagers and not be overpriced. Also many popular lines, such as Bench, Hooch, Animal, Young Ted Baker, are already being sold in the multiples.

How do you compete? Try and source good quality alternatives, maybe not branded, but with good different styles, colourful, detailed and adult like. The other option is to stock the same brands as the multiples and trade off their advertising. You may not get as good a deal from the suppliers but you will get full access to all the styles, not just the few limited ones that the multiple takes on and this way you can compete with better choice. Animal from Inspecs is a great brand for this as there are good choices of styles that multiples do not stock and some of the products are scaled down versions of the actual adult frame.

Don't be afraid to put a realistic mark up on quality children's frames; after all you are selling it as a better product with real benefits. If you do need to be price conscious due to local competition, do your research, match the price or better it, even if it means lowering your margin. The repeat business can help recuperate any loss in initial profit.

## Premium lenses

When dispensing do you look at prescription prior to choosing products or look at products then see if the prescription will be available?

Treat kids in the same way as an adult dispense and you will find it easier to recommend better products. We can be quite conscious of recommending thinner and lighter lenses but, in fact, most parents won't want thick lenses for their kids. Be realistic, if it will make a difference in any way then its worth mentioning,

We tend to be sceptical when giving children coatings and this is something that must be rethought. We give adults a hard coat on reading glasses they will throw around. We give adults anti-reflective coatings if they want to see better, or if they drive or use visual display units. Don't kids want to see better, don't they use computers, and start driving at 17?

If a parent is concerned that a child will not keep their lenses clean, then turn this to your advantage and recommend a lens with hydrophobic



**There are plenty of premium frames to choose**

coatings and enhanced scratch resistance? Examples of products to recommend include Essilor's Crizal Forte or Hoya's Longlife.

Do you recommend lenses that are more durable? Do you avoid selling children rimless spectacles due to the breakage risks? There are more and more products at our disposal to protect the sight and spectacles for the wearer.

Polycarbonate lenses will give a lightweight, durable solution to most abuse handed out by children, but the optics or properties of this material were always a slight bugbear. However now there are other options. There have been glowing reports on the durability of Trivex, PNX, Trilogy and the like, which offer the durability benefits of polycarbonate but without the poor optical performance and reduced scratch resistance. These are ideal materials for the rough and tumble life of children's spectacles, yet still too few of us feel confident to recommend them. They are ideal for rimless and offer a much lighter and more comfortable option to most. Most 1.6 and 1.67 lenses are now so much better quality that durability should not be an issue. Also the obvious benefits of reduced weight and thickness are surely worth mentioning.

Obviously cost will be an issue to some, but as with frames it may be worth reducing the extra you charge for this product and check your margins. Volume increase will lead to greater profitability, warranties provided with the products take care of most of the remake issues,

and again the lenses are likely to be replaced more frequently than with adults due to prescription changes.

## What of sunglasses?

Do you actively promote sunglasses to children? Children typically spend more time outside exposed to UV than adults do. Are we all neglecting our duties by not recommending them? There are some great styles out there like Ray-Ban Junior, Zoobugs, Adidas, Uvex and even Oakley do small sized frames that offer good protection and can have prescriptive lenses. Recommend polarised lenses for active children, especially for sports and water activities. The use of wrapped lenses also will offer greater glare control, and eye protection. There are good options for sportswear in this category too, even if the prescription is too high for a direct glazed product. Prescriptive inserts can be of use here.

Other lens possibilities include the options offered by photochromatics. As a society we have been made more aware of the damage UV does to our skin, and as opticians we should be recommending protection for the eye area. The old issues we had with light-reactive lenses was the darkness of the resting phase for children, however, with the newer, lighter and faster lenses on the market like Transitions VI, such negativity is a thing of the past. Transitions also has a fun, informative and interactive section on its website that is designed help practitioners with children's eye care and is well worth checking out.

There are other premium options that can be offered to those who have more complicated visual coherence problems, such as specialist tints for dyslexia or individualised lens options like Essilor's S/V F360 or Impressions Mono from Rodenstock. They would normally be used when a clinical or adaptation problem has been identified, but also remember that customised lenses can be a great general option if already using a thinner or coated option for the optimum product.

In general terms, always try to ensure that children and parents are given options, and are not just rushed through the door. Make the whole experience a good one and you will continue to see the patient, their siblings, their parents and their friends will follow. ●

● **James Dawson** is a consulting locum dispensing optician specialising in independent practice business building