

## Treasure Tower: Making Dental Visits FUN!

By Alison Caldwell-Andrews

*How one mom is helping thousands of children (and their parents!) be less afraid of dental visits*

“We tried *everything!*” said Kelton’s mother as she remembered what it was like to try to get her five year-old boy, Kelton, to cooperate with the dentist. “I couldn’t get him to open his mouth and he would scream and cry. Finally I would just sit on the [dental] chair with him in my lap and hold his arms down.”

Almost no one likes taking his or her children to the dentist. Studies show that a large number of children experience significant anxiety while at the dentist. When parents are faced with anxious children in this situation, many feel helpless. “I’d feel so bad,” said Kelton’s mother. “I thought, it’s either me holding him down or we’ll have to put him under anesthesia.”

Although anesthesia is an option for children who are extremely anxious about dental visits, it is not ideal and carries a number of risks. However, many parents become so desperate to help their children that they can identify with Kelton’s mother’s feelings. “We were at the point of considering anesthesia for everything related to the dentist,” she said. “We had tried everything else - stickers, balloons, toothbrushes. We even tried to buy him toys at the dollar store or tell him he’d get to go see Grandma. He just didn’t respond”

But everything changed at Kelton’s next checkup. Kelton’s dentist had just started participating in the Treasure Tower program. As Kelton’s mother described, “that was all it took.”

The Treasure Tower Reward Program, an innovation created by Salt Lake City mother of three, Kathy Ruggiero, is an incentive/reward system that uses a uniquely designed machine to dispense toys, not candy. In addition to dental offices, the program also works as a great motivator in medical offices and schools. Children earn a brass “Super Patient” or silver “Super Student” token from their dentist, doctor or teacher and are then able to redeem their token for a prize at the Treasure Tower, a colorful, eight-container, rotating machine. The concept is simple but magical – and kids (*and* parents, dentists, doctors and teachers!) love it. Independent Treasure Tower business owners, established and supported by Ruggiero, provide the machines, toys and service to their local areas.

Many dentists and doctors have prizes, stickers or other ways of giving children small trinkets to help make the office visit more fun. Teachers often have a desk drawer or box of little rewards for their students. The difference with the Treasure Tower is that the child gets to vend his or her own toy. Something about this process is magical in the eyes of toddlers and young teens alike. Plus it is sanitary, organized and hassle-free!

Jessie Redd, a daycare provider in Montana, is a Treasure Tower representative and manages a number of Treasure Towers in her area. “Since I’m a representative I have all kinds of the little toys at my house,” says Jessie. “I have an 8 year-old daughter who has every one of those little toys. However, one day at school, my daughter earned a “Super Student” token for something that she had done at school. She got a toy out of the Treasure Tower in the school office -- the same kind of toy that she has access to at home anytime she wants -- and she carried that special toy around the house for days and days. I couldn’t believe how proud she was of that little toy. It didn’t matter what it was. What mattered was the process of getting it. I just think it’s a great example of how motivating the Treasure Tower concept is.”

Any parent who has walked past a row of vending machines at the supermarket knows how powerful that motivator is. Children beg for a chance to get something – anything – out of a vending machine. When offered the chance to get a Super Patient token or a Super Student token so they can choose a toy at the Treasure Tower, children are indeed extremely motivated. A pediatric office in Salt Lake City told Ruggiero, “Some children even ask for a shot if they know that is the only way to receive a token for the Treasure Tower.” Now that’s motivation!

Mary Lou Lockard, a Treasure Tower representative in the state of Washington, relates a story she was told by a dental hygienist from one of her offices. “A little girl with Down Syndrome was having a very hard time at the dentist, crying, clenching her teeth and refusing to open her mouth. The hygienist watched as the dentist handed the little girl a token and told her ‘Here’s your Super Patient token. If you can sit still and be my helper, when you’re all done you can go get a prize out of the Treasure Tower.’ From that moment on, the little girl was completely transformed. She held onto her token and kept her mouth open and even cooperated for a fluoride treatment. After finishing her checkup, she skipped over to the Treasure Tower to get her toy. As this hygienist told Mary Lou, ‘I’d never seen anything like it.’”

Kelton’s mother would agree. Since their dentist has incorporated the Treasure Tower into the office, Kelton has never had another problem with anxiety or cooperation. “He could see the Tower when we entered the office and he was so excited,” says Kelton’s mother. “He walked right in and opened his mouth, no problem. Since then, he’s even had teeth pulled and cavities filled without any trouble. He actually looks forward to going to the dentist now! He loves to think about what new toy he’ll choose.”

Perhaps Kelton’s mother best sums it up in these words: “It changed our whole experience and made it so we could actually just go to the dentist.” Since research shows that children who have bad experiences at dental visits are less likely to return it’s easy to see that a system that can help children actually look forward to dentist visits might mean more frequent checkups and better follow-through with dental care. “The Treasure Tower system is really a simple behavioral solution to a widespread problem,” says Treasure Tower president, Kathy Ruggiero. “Kids who used to get upset about going to the dentist or doctor are motivated to cooperate instead and their anxiety and fear is replaced with fun anticipation. It’s easy and it works.”

Currently, Ruggiero has about sixty Treasure Tower representatives in thirty states. Machines are placed primarily in dental, medical and educational facilities but can be placed in any location that would benefit from incentives. “The demand for Treasure Towers is increasing constantly,” says Ruggiero. “Right now the only limiting factor is that we need more representatives to meet the demand. Being a Treasure Tower representative is a great business for anyone who wants an additional source of income. We have a large number of offices and schools on record who are just waiting for someone in their area to begin to offer the Treasure Tower service.”

*Alison Caldwell-Andrews is a researcher at Yale University who studies how to help reduce children's anxiety during medical procedures. For information about the Treasure Tower service, visit their website at [www.TreasureTowerRewards.com](http://www.TreasureTowerRewards.com).*

*For information about being a Treasure Tower Representative, visit their website at [www.TreasureTower.net](http://www.TreasureTower.net)*