

## Functional Ortho...What?

We recently spent a lovely weekend under the bright lights of Vegas, learning about crooked teeth. To be honest, most of our weekend was spent in a windowless classroom, far from any of the fun that Las Vegas is known for. Those tax advantaged trips are never as pleasant as “real” vacations. After being kept from the casino for two days, I now know how the lions feel at the zoo.

As you can imagine, I rarely get excited about spending my downtime in school, but this weekend was different. If you pay no attention to anything I ever write, please finish this column. This is something that could change someone’s life for the better.

I’m talking about functional jaw orthopedics. That’s a lot of words, so let’s think of this as a new twist on orthodontics or braces. Let me try to explain.

Have you ever wondered why some people are born with crooked or crowded teeth? Basically, there are three components to properly aligned teeth. They are the upper jaw (maxilla), the lower jaw (mandible), and the teeth. If a child gets Mom’s upper jaw, three hundred pound Uncle Joe’s lower jaw and Dad’s teeth, it doesn’t take a dentist to figure out we might have a problem. The goal of functional orthopedics and any form of orthodontics, for that matter, is to bring the 3 parts together in harmony and make a beautiful child. For simplicity’s sake, I am intentionally leaving out some other very important factors such as the TMJ (jaw joint) and airway, because I am only allotted a carefully measured ration of ink each week.

So what has changed? Traditionally, kids got braces when they got their permanent teeth, around twelve years old. That can still work, but for some cases we have a better way. Studies show that at twelve years of age, your children’s jaws are mostly done growing, so we are limited to how much we can change jaw size. Sometimes, this leads to having to pull perfectly good teeth so orthodontists can get things to line up. As a parent, this has never made sense to me. As a dentist, I see too many adults with jaw joint problems and extracted premolar teeth.

What if we could grow your children’s jaws at an early age so that there would be room for all of the permanent teeth? Bingo...that’s what we now do. That is functional jaw orthopedics.

Without getting bogged down in details, here’s how it works. We can check your child’s growth as soon as they get all of their baby teeth. As they grow, we monitor their bite and jaw growth with exams and x-rays. We also look for and intervene with other problems like thumb sucking, airway issues, and tongue thrusting that can disrupt their growth. If things aren’t matching up, we can step in and put in a special appliance that can help things develop evenly and correctly. This doesn’t always prevent your child from having to get braces, but it makes their time in braces a lot shorter and, hopefully, prevents them from having any teeth pulled, or even worse, major jaw surgery.

I’m really excited about where this area of dentistry is headed. This treatment can also help adults with snoring, sleep apnea, jaw joint pain, headaches, and much more. It really is an area where we help people in a positive way.

Until next time, keep smiling.

*-Questions, comments, or suggestions can be emailed to Drs. Chip and Jennifer Parrish at [ParrishDental@aol.com](mailto:ParrishDental@aol.com).*