

The evolution of braces...

My generation (I'm not sure what we are called by the media these days) was one of the first where braces were a common occurrence. I can remember many a middle school dance where the sparkling lights were reflected off of more than the cheap disco balls. I can also remember wondering if my own braces were going to ruin my first "real" kiss or get me locked up in my girlfriend's retainer. I had nightmares of going to football practice with a piece of pink plastic hanging out from under my mouth guard. Luckily, all that worry was for nothing and I passed that kiss with flying colors. That's what I thought at the time, but come to think of it, I seem to remember getting dumped shortly thereafter. It must have been because my teeth weren't straight enough yet.

As with everything else in life, a lot has changed since my middle school days twenty something years ago. I still remember my dad's cell phone that looked like one of those Vietnam/World War II walkie-talkie backpacks that soldiers used to call in airstrikes. I also remember my experience of having braces and retainers. I remember telling my mom that she was going to have to drag me into the office to get them (she didn't.) I remember throwing up when they took my impressions (that poor underpaid dental assistant.) And most of all, I remember how bad my teeth hurt for four days after every wire change. All that said, looking back in time, I must thank my parents and my dentist for a job well done. So what has changed in orthodontics since my experience twenty years ago?

Early treatment – I was blessed to have a dentist who was really at the top of his game. Twenty plus years ago, he actually guided the growth of my jaws at an early age so that I never had teeth pulled to get things straightened out. Nowadays, we evaluate growth at an early age and step in to make the jaws the right size so that we rarely pull teeth to make a pretty smile.

Airways, pretty faces, and healthy jaw joints – Modern orthodontics looks at the whole face, not just the teeth. We now treat the underlying problems that caused the malocclusion (crooked teeth) in the first place. We also aim for broad, pretty, "Hollywood" smiles and correctly proportioned facial structures, as well as correctly positioned bites for healthy jaw joints. We even check and refer treatment for breathing problems that can disrupt tooth and jaw growth.

Light, gentle forces – The wires that we now use to straighten teeth are much gentler and more consistent than the wires of old. That means less soreness after visits and a shorter treatment time.

Clear braces – In some instances, we can now straighten teeth with clear ceramic brackets or clear trays that are almost invisible. There are even instances where we can put brackets on the inside of the teeth so that nobody (except your tongue) can see them.

Smaller is better – When I had braces, the brackets stuck out as far as my nose. Modern materials have made the brackets smaller, smoother, and less obtrusive. This makes treatment easier on the lips and cheeks.

Yes, a lot has changed for the better. We're even getting close to being able to scan your teeth and jaws so that those impressions that gag us all can be a thing of the past. Too bad they didn't have that in my day. Until next time, keep smiling.

-Questions or comments can be sent to Drs. Parrish at ParrishDental@aol.com.