

Going to the Dentist!

For some children (and adults!) there's nothing more frightening than the thought of a visit to the dentist. For children with autism spectrum disorder, this fear can be overwhelming.

Preverbal children may not understand what is happening, and it is very difficult to comfort or reassure them. Even verbal children may not understand the purpose of going to see a strange man/woman in a white coat, who uses strange equipment to look in their mouth and expects the child to lie back in a chair with a light glaring down on their face.

Some children have sensory issues – sensitivity to touch, sound, taste etc – that can make a trip to the dentist unbearable. Whirring and buzzing noises, cold instruments in the mouth, and the taste or texture of fluoride and polish can all be very disturbing. In addition, the dentist and dental staff are extremely close to the child, uncomfortably invading his or her personal space. The closeness of the dentist/hygienist, combined with other sensory issues (buttons from the dentist's coat rubbing on the child? perfume worn by the dental hygienist?) increases the sensory load that the child has to deal with. At the same time, these sensory issues could make regular dental care, like brushing teeth and flossing, difficult, so the likelihood that the dental visit will require invasive treatment and repair increases.

Some dentists are able to accommodate the needs of these special patients, while other dentists struggle to examine and treat children who may make the visit challenging.

When researching this topic, I came across numerous 'horror stories': parents talking about the harrowing experience they had taking their ASD children to the dentist. But what can be done to make visits to the dentist more successful and less frightening?

Nothing will completely eliminate the fears and concerns that children and their parents may feel about an upcoming dental visit, but taking some steps to prepare for the visit may help to reduce these fears. Preparation is important not only for the child, but for the dentist as well.

Strategies to help (revised from National Autistic Society website, <http://www.autism.org.uk/nas/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1064&a=7844>)

Preparation

As a result of past negative experiences, understandably, many caregivers leave telling the individual about a dental appointment till the last minute or on the day

of the visit. Even though it may initially cause a behaviour pattern change it is in most situations best to try and inform the individual as early as possible. This can be difficult if their concept of time is poor. Using visual supports, for example a calendar, can help to clarify when an event is occurring.

If it is their first visit to the dentist you may like to take them to meet the dentist and other staff prior to any treatment. You may also like to show them the equipment which the dentist will use and how it works.

It is also important to prepare the dentist and their team with as much information as possible, so they can make adaptations to the procedure and be aware of the individual's needs.

Try to ensure that the appointment is the first of the day, maybe book a double time slot. This reduces the chance of the dentist running late and provides enough time not to feel rushed.

Social stories™

Social stories are an effective way of providing information to an individual about an activity and the reason for doing it. A social story could be a good way of helping an individual to understand what happens at the dentist and why we need to go to the dentist.

Story books

There are lots of basic storybooks about visiting the dentist which may also help. Check your local library for books appropriate for your child.

Breaking down the visit using visual supports

It may be useful to try and produce a sequence of pictures or photos to show the stages of going to the dentist. This allows you to explain the different steps so they know what is coming next and when it is finished. You may wish to include a reward picture at the end of the sequence so they have something to look forward to.

Tammy Davenport, who authors the About.Com Guide to Dentistry, has developed a photo gallery with photos of common procedures at the dentist. You can download these photos, and put together a short book to show your child what he/she can expect at the dentist.

<http://dentistry.about.com/od/childrensdentistry/ig/Dentist-Appointment-Photos/>

Time indicators

Helping them to realize that this experience does have a time limit is important. By using visual (sand timer) or auditory timers (buzzer, watch alarm) they can have an understanding and monitor the time of the experience.

Comforters/distracters

Letting them take comforters could help occupy them and/or distract them. For children with sensitivity to lights, sunglasses could be worn while the overhead light is shining. For children with sensitivity to sounds, headphones (either sound-canceling headphones, or a radio/portable DVD with headphones) might help to comfort the child and lessen their fears.

Sedation

For some the experience is so distressing that sedation may need to be considered. If you feel this is the case you need to talk this through with your dentist and a medical professional to discuss the options. Complete sedation, if required, will need to be done in a hospital setting. Many pediatric dentists will have admitting privileges at hospitals. Be sure to discuss this with your dentist if you feel general anesthesia is the most appropriate route.

The University of Manitoba has developed a dental facility for special needs children. Find more information about this facility at the Health Sciences Centre website: http://www.hsc.mb.ca/autismprogram/home_family.htm

Preparing your dentist!

Like much of the population, some dentists don't know a lot about autism or how it can affect an individual's behaviour. There can be ignorance or misconceptions that cause the situation to be even more frightening or overwhelming for the ASD patient.

Daniel Ravel, DDS, on the website DentalResource.org, has put together the following list for dentists, to assist them in caring for their ASD patients:

TIPS FOR DENTISTS (from <http://dentalresource.org/topic55autistic.html>)

Offer parents and children the opportunity to tour your dental office, so that they may ask questions, touch equipment, and get used to the place. Allow autistic children to bring comfort items, such as a blanket or a favorite toy.

Children with autism need sameness and continuity in their environment. A gradual and slow exposure to the dental office and staff is therefore recommended.

Solicit suggestions from the parent or caregiver on how best to deal with the child.

Children with autism are easily overwhelmed by sensory overload. This can cause "stimming" (flapping of arms, rocking, screaming, etc). Autistic children are hypersensitive to loud noises, sudden movement, and things that are felt.

Make the first appointment short and positive.

Approach the autistic child in a quiet, non-threatening manner. Don't crowd the child.

Use a "tell-show-do" approach to providing care. Explain the procedure before it occurs. Show the instruments that you will use. Provide frequent praise for acceptable behavior.

Invite the child to sit alone in the dental chair to become familiar with the treatment setting.

Autistics will want to know what's going to happen next. Explain what you're doing so it makes sense to them. Explain every treatment before it happens.

Always tell the autistic child where and why you need to touch them, especially when using dental or medical equipment.

Talk in direct, short phrases. Talk calmly. Autistics take everything literally – so watch what you say. Avoid words or phrases with double meanings.

Once the dental patient is seated, begin a cursory examination using only your fingers. Keep the light out of the eyes.

Next, use a toothbrush, or possibly a dental mirror to gain access to the mouth.

Praise and reinforce good behavior. Ignore poor behavior.

Invite the parent or caregiver to hold the child's hand during the dental examination.

Some autistic children can be calmed by moderate pressure, such as by using a papoose board to wrap the child. On the other hand, "light" touch (such as by air from the dental air syringe) can agitate them. For instance, you are more likely to have problems wrapping a blood pressure cuff around the arm than by inflating it!

Some children will need sedation or general anesthesia so that dental treatment can be accomplished. Sedation of autistic children who are 8 years and older simply does not work.

The following video clip shows a dental visit with a young boy with autism, and the dentist's attempts to reassure and comfort the child while still completing the dental exam:

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=artQFqd6osQ>

All of these steps, to prepare the child and the dentist, are important, but one of the most important factors that will predict a successful visit is communication. Parents need to inform the dental staff about the specific needs of their child. Dentists and dental staff need to listen to the parents, and to explain procedures and options clearly. Dentists may need to get 'creative' in their dentistry (for instance, my pediatric dentist suggested that my son straddle my lap facing me, then we leaned him back so his head was in the dentist's lap. That way, my son felt more secure, I could gently restrain his hands, and the dentist got a good...though quick!...look at his mouth).

A pamphlet has been developed by the National Autistic Society in the UK (a modified version can be downloaded using the link to the left). This pamphlet includes a form that parents can fill out, describing some of the issues their child might have. You may like to complete this form, give it to your dentist, and ask that the form be kept in your child's file. This can open the lines of communication and, with luck, make your child's visit to the dentist a little less painful for everyone!