

Dental Care for Kids with Special Needs

For many children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, dental care is often not a top priority and takes a back seat when dealing with other pressing medical issues. However, maintaining good oral health should be essential for everyone.

In the words of former United States Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, “You are not a healthy person unless you have good oral health. Oral health is part of general health, and it can directly impact your overall health and quality of life.”

Common mouth problems like dental decay or gum disease can affect all children; however, children with special needs may suffer these conditions more easily and more often. If dental care is left untreated oral disease can lead to complications that can be difficult and expensive to cure.

Disease prevention is key

The good news is that dental disease is much easier to prevent than to treat; proper oral hygiene and regular visits to the dentist can prevent many dental diseases. However, given that many general dentists don’t treat children with special needs, parents and caregivers may find it challenging to find a dentist to care for their child.



When looking for a dentist, parents of special needs children should find a qualified practitioner who makes them, and their child, feel comfortable — a dentist who understands the wide range of issues these patients face and can accommodate those needs. Pediatric dentists are the dental professionals of choice for children with special needs. Beyond dental school, pediatric dentists have 2-3 years of specialized training. Pediatric dentists are like the pediatricians of dentistry.

How to get started?

Ask your pediatrician for a referral to a local pediatric dentist when your child turns one. This is the perfect time for an initial oral examination. It's important that parents bring their children in early so that dentists can deliver preventive measures instead of treating problems, which might require multiple, lengthy, and uncomfortable procedures.

Arrange for an orientation session

An initial interview will allow parents and children to tour the office and meet the dental team. This is the perfect time to ask questions, voice concerns, and make sure that you and your new pediatric dentist are on the same page. Clear, open

communication is especially important.

Provide your pediatric dentist with information about your child. A detailed medical history must also include information about communication abilities, sensory challenges, a child's interests, and anything about your child that could help future visits go smoothly.

Short, frequent visits

When introducing a special needs child to the dental setting, it is best to have them come for several short, frequent visits. The first visit ought to be an introduction and should be fun and enjoyable for the child, so he'll be eager to return. Some children might need a series of two to three appointments to help them master a task.

Sensory-friendly office

When scheduling, usually, the first appointment of the day seems to work best for most children with special needs. Wait time is usually minimal. The office can be conditioned to accommodate for the sensory sensitive child. The lights can be dimmed, radio and television can be turned off, and the dental drill is not buzzing yet. No other children are present, and there are no distractions. If the office is quieter and calmer, the dentist and staff can devote and give your child more personal attention. Typically in the morning, the child is also more rested, in a better mood, and not worn out from therapy or school.

The dental office will also recommend scheduling future appointments on the same day and time, and to use the same quiet room and staff member. Children with special needs adjust better to the dental environment when there is continuity of care.

In-office oral health care can be a pleasant and rewarding experience for children

with special needs if enough time is taken to establish trust. While some dentists can accommodate for special needs patients, pediatric dentists will focus on meeting their needs and working with their limitations. Caring for a child with special needs takes compassion and understanding.

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