

Autism at the Dentist

Denise M Barrera, MPH

Anticipation of situations that create anxiety for your child are crucial for children with high functioning Autism. The dentist office has come a long way but still has some enhancements to make in the way of providing a sensory rich experience for their clients with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The dentist office has a lot going on within the office and can lead to sensory overload for some children. There are bright lights, laying on crinkly paper on a hard bed, staying still for an eternity while holding your mouth open with someone's hand lodged inside, and not to mention the smells of teeth grinding and latex gloves, taste of fluoride, pulling of dental floss, and trying to answer questions when the nurse asks you something while her hand is in your mouth. We may not have processed all that a child ensures on a typical dentist visit in the same way the child does but it is a real struggle for a large number of children on the spectrum.

If you have experienced your child being papoose you will know how painful it is to watch as a parent. The child experiences excruciating anxiety and often does not even get a decent teeth cleaning after it is all said and done.

Shop around. There are many pediatric dentists who cater to special needs children. They allow special appointments in a room that is separated from the others. This room might be in the back where the child cannot hear the cries of other children or the sounds of the drilling of teeth. Check with the doctor to see if you can bring a weighted blanket for your child or ask if they have one in the office. When the child lays on the exam table lay the blanket over them prior to putting the splashguard around their neck, this will help with calm them prior to the exam and during the exam.

When calling to inquire at the dentist office, some things to consider might be: does the facility have light covers over the bright lights on the ceiling, does the doctor have a head lamp that he/she can use to alleviate the child from having the bright overhead light in their eyes, is there a TV mounted on the ceiling that the child can watch, can you call ahead to find out what movie it is so you can prepare your child for the movie and give them a little incentive to get there, ask the dentist office if you can bring a soft blanket or sheet to lay over the exam chair so that the child will be more comfortable when laying on the exam table.

You can make a visual schedule to tell a story about a child's successful visit to the dentist. They can take this with them to the office. The parent can go to the office ahead of time and take photos of the chair, the x-ray machine, the exam room, the tools to be used so the child knows more about what to expect. Show children in the social story getting their free toothbrush and sticker at the end of the visit so the child can see the immediate reward they too can get for a cooperative checkup. The doctor may even let you photograph him/her giving the child the incentive, this will make the doctor a little less scary as the child will have in their mind that the doctor is going to give them a reward for cooperation in the chair.

Be patient, the dentist office is a source of stress. It will get easier as the child visits the dentist more frequently and gets into a routine.