



TIP SHEET

Providing Dental Care to Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders



Providing care to children with autism spectrum disorders can be challenging for dental professionals. Autism disorders can cause children to have extreme sensitivities, be unable to control their impulses and have difficulty communicating. Learning about autism can help dental professionals to provide better care and make the experience better for everyone.

Defining Autism

The term autism is often used to describe pervasive developmental disorders that are neurologically based and of an unknown cause. Autism spectrum disorders include: autistic disorder; Asperger's syndrome; Rett's disorder; childhood disintegrative disorder; and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDD NOS). While there are differences between the disorders, they are typically characterized by atypical social, communication, coping and play skills.

Quick Facts About Autism

- Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States with 10 -17 percent annual growth in its incidence.
- 50 children in the U.S. are diagnosed with autism every day.
- Autism occurs 1 in approximately 166 births
- In the 1990s, the U.S. population increased by 13 percent while the population with autism increased by 172 percent.
- 1.5 million Americans are affected by autism.
- Autism occurs in families of all racial, ethnic and social backgrounds.
- Autism is three to four times more common in boys than in girls.

Symptoms of Autism

Behaviors and symptoms of autism spectrum disorders may include:

- poor attention and concentration
- hyperactivity
- obsessive behaviors
- compulsions or rituals
- stereotyped mannerisms
- anxiety or fears
- depressive mood, irritability, agitation, inappropriate affect
- sleep problems
- self-injurious behaviors
- tics

Basic Strategies for Serving Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

While providing dental care to children with autism can be challenging, some basic strategies can ease anxiety and help visits go a little more smoothly.

Include the Child in Your Procedures

You can ease anxiety by including the child in your procedures. For example, allow the child to carry the registration form to the desk or give him/her something to bring back to the chair. This allows the child to feel more in control of the situation.

Gain Trust

Gain children's trust by familiarizing them with the procedures at your office. Children with autism are comforted by knowing what comes next. Tell them ahead of time what to expect, for example, "Next I am going to squirt some water in your mouth. It may be cold." Then, proceed slowly, adding one step at a time and explaining each as you go. For children who are extremely anxious, you may suggest a visit to your office prior the appointment. This will help to ease their fears over going to a new place, meeting new people and hearing new sounds.

Take Your Time

Going at the child's pace is very important. Take your time and prepare the child for each step, letting him/her know when something is going to happen. For example, you could say, "Next I am going to squirt water in your mouth. Ready, set, go." Always show the child what you are going to do before doing it. You can also use predictable language such as, "In one more minute, the light will go on." You may also use sequencing or "First, then" boards. These picture boards show children each step of the visit so they know what to expect. To create one, take pictures of each step and mount them in order. Show the child which step you are on and which step is next.

Consider sensory needs

Children with autism have increased needs in sensory areas such as smells, touches, signs and sounds. Allow time for children to process the plethora of sensory information that they are receiving during their dental visit. Take time to explain the sounds and smells and show them on their hands how something will feel.

Use Signs, Pictures or Control Words

Children who have communication challenges may find a visual strip helpful. Also helpful for children with communication challenges is agreeing upon control words, signs or pictures. Tell the child that they can hold up their hand to mean "stop." You could also give them a card with a picture of a stop sign to hold up when they want you to stop.

Use Motivating Games, Objects or Rewards

To encourage children to participate in their appointment, consider playing Simon says. This allows you to give directions such as, "Simon says, sit in chair." The game makes the appointment seem like fun and children are more likely to participate and follow directions. Rewarding children's achievements may also encourage them. Give a sticker or small prize for each direction that they are able to follow. If your procedure room has audio or video capabilities, you may reward the child with his/her favorite cartoon or song.

Set Goals

Breaking activities into small steps will make it easier for children to participate. Provide clear expectations for each small step. For example, tell the child "five more brushes, then all done." This allows the child to focus on only the task at hand, rather than the full procedure or appointment.

Learn Calming Strategies

It is easier to prevent a child from getting upset than to react to a child whose behaviors are already elevated. You can achieve this by asking the parent or caregiver ahead of time which calming strategies work best. For example, sunglasses, soothing music, limited distractions, etc. During the visit, try to read the child's cues to see if a break is needed. Establishing a routine throughout the visit will also help the child to feel comforted and maintain a calm demeanor. Use predictable language, give the child choices and always allow enough time for the child to process what is being asked of him or her.

Disclaimer: This information is provided for reference only. Consult your dentist before engaging in any procedures, practices, or treatments.

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