Supporting children and adults with autism and learning disabilities to visit the dentist

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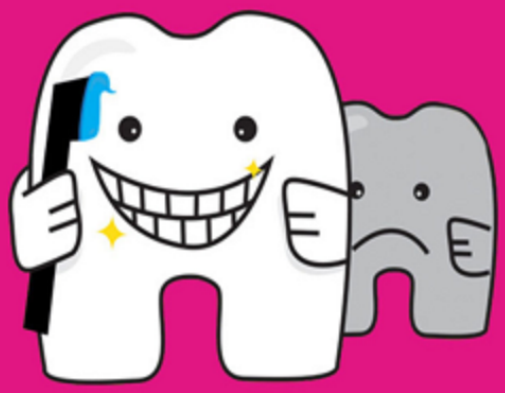

Introduction

Many of us dread the thought of visiting the dentist but for people with autism and/or learning difficulties it can be an especially challenging experience.

The combination of a busy waiting room, unfamiliar staff, bright lighting, noisy equipment, the feel of cold instruments and strange tastes all have the potential to cause sensory overload, anxiety and challenging behaviour.

Studies uniformly report poor standards of dental health in children and adults with learning disabilities. Additionally, dental attendance can be a major challenge for the individual and their carers/ families.

This help sheet outlines the things to consider when supporting a child or adult with autism and/ or learning difficulties to access dental treatment and promote good oral health.

Top tips

Start young and make it part of the routine

From a young age encourage brushing and opening the mouth for someone to check inside. This can be through little interaction games or holding the mouth open for a count of 10.

Promote good oral health

Health education sessions on how to keep teeth healthy and clean can encourage good oral hygiene and prevent later difficulties. These sessions are adapted to the individual's development level. Often the school nurse can give advice or lead these sessions.

Prepare in advance for a dental appointment

Careful preparation which takes communication and behavioural issues into account can help the individual to better cope with the situation.

- The individual can be shown books, videos or pictures about seeing the dentist, or watch a trusted adult have their teeth checked.
- Think about the best time of day and the best person to support the appointment. Often the first appointment can mean the waiting room is empty and there are no delays.

- Make sure you know where you are going.
- Prepare handy props, perhaps a visual support tool that breaks down the sequence of what will happen. This will help the individual to know which is coming next, when each step is finished and to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

- Take things that will comfort the individual, for example their teddy, an iPod with their favourite music or their own sunglasses.
- The dentist needs to know about the individual's medical history and medication, but it can also help to give them information about their developmental needs, for example how to communicate, what causes them anxiety or what helps them to relax. It can help to share written information like a 'health passport' ahead of the appointment.
- Use visual or auditory timers (e.g. sand timers, buzzers, a mobile phone alarm) to help the individual to understand that this experience has a time limit.

Take small steps

- For some individuals it would be overwhelming for them to visit a dental practice so they may be visited by a domiciliary dentist. Arranging a visit from the dentist to the school or home environment can help the individual to feel at ease. Specialist domiciliary dentists are skilled in working this way.
- The domiciliary dentist can check teeth using a toothbrush in their mouth if the use of tools is too distressing.
- Have regular appointments to get used to the experience
- Once an individual is confident in meeting the domiciliary dentist they can be supported to visit the dental practice through a number of gradual steps, all aimed to ensure a positive experience.
- Initial visits to the dental practice may just be as simple as encouraging an individual to sit in the chair, or even just to going into the building to meet the staff
- Build the visit to the dentist into a pleasant routine by doing something enjoyable as part of the trip out
- Use praise, encouragement and rewards

Seek further help if needed

If all other approaches fail, it may be necessary to access more specialist support including the use of sedation or general anaesthetic to address oral health concerns. However with good planning and a gradual approach most people with complex needs can maintain healthy teeth.

Looking after teeth some helpful hints

- Reduce sugar intake, especially in between meals
- Check labels for 'hidden sugars
- Always ask your doctor, dentist or chemist for sugar free medicines when these are required
- Don't give sweets as a reward – use alternatives such as a favourite object or activity
- Avoid fizzy drinks, juices and squashes and replace with water or milk if possible
- Give support for tooth brushing by demonstrating each step and taking each stage, one step at a time

Spread the word...

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our in-house clinical team. If you found this information useful please feel free to distribute this help sheet to your own contacts parents, carers, social workers, or anyone who you feel may benefit from them.

If you would like any further information please contact us:
01789 767800 | info@optionsgroup.co.uk

If you need help looking for services for an individual with an autism spectrum condition, we can help. Click below for the Autism Placement Support Service.