



# Oral Health Tips

## Special Needs Dental Care

Everyone deserves a healthy smile. However, dental care is one of the most seriously neglected issues for children and adults with physical, medical and mental disabilities. Disabling conditions, such as cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, mental illness, Down syndrome, genetic disorders, spinal cord injuries, Alzheimer's disease, stroke or arthritis, can make it difficult to accomplish even the most basic dental needs - brushing, flossing, regular dental checkups and getting a balanced diet needed for healthy teeth.

Some tips for good dental hygiene, plus regular checkups, can help prevent needless toothaches and other dental problems.

### Care beyond the routine

- With the demands of a disease or disabling condition the oral health of special care individuals is too often neglected.
- Some medical or oral conditions may require more specialized care, but most people with disabilities can be successfully treated in a general dental practice.
- When special care is needed, ask questions. Does the dentist have training and experience in treating patients with a certain condition? Is the dental office accessible to the disabled?

### Toothbrush and dental floss tips

When a dexterity problem or a physical disability makes it hard to hold a firm grip on dental hygiene devices, easy modifications can be made at home.

- Enlarge the toothbrush handle with a sponge or rubber ball. Or widen the handle by wrapping it with an elastic bandage or adhesive tape.
- Use a wide elastic band to attach the toothbrush to the hand.
- Lengthen the toothbrush handle with a piece of wood or plastic by taping on a ruler, popsicle stick or tongue depressor.
- Depending on the individual's needs and sensitivities, consider using an electric toothbrush.

Hyposensitive (less than the normal ability to respond to stimuli) individuals often process sensory input in which they need or enjoy more intensity. They often find the extra stimulation provided by an electric toothbrush to be a positive factor. Whereas, hypersensitive (excessively sensitive) individuals typically need less intensity and therefore may not enjoy an electric toothbrush.

- Tie dental floss into a loop for easier handling or use a commercial floss holder.

### Tips for parents or caregivers

- Before beginning an oral hygiene task, explain what you are about to do. "I am going to brush your teeth now." Or "I am going to help floss your teeth now."
- Work in a slow, calm manner to avoid startling the person.
- Support the person's head. Take care to prevent choking or gagging when the head is tilted back.
- If the person is unable or unwilling to keep his or her mouth open, a mouth prop made by taping several tongue blades together might help. Your dentist can teach you how to insert a mouth prop to avoid injury to teeth.

*continued on next page*

## Special Needs Dental Care

*continued from previous page*

### Children with special needs

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 17 percent of American children have some type of developmental disability, including speech and language disorders and learning disabilities. Children with special needs often have unique challenges that make dental visits and good oral health habits extremely difficult. For example, many children with autism have sensory challenges that make touch, smell, sound, and light uncomfortable or even intolerable. Children with autism also have difficulties with new experiences and people with whom they are not familiar.

### Dental care tips for children with special needs

Home care takes just a few minutes and helps prevent needless dental problems.

- Start regular dental visits by the child's first birthday - or earlier if you think there might be a dental problem.
- Generally, effective brushing and flossing, moderate snacking and adequate decay-fighting fluoride in the water supply are important for teeth throughout one's lifetime.
- Set up regular professional cleanings and fluoride treatments. Sealants can prevent tooth decay on the chewing surfaces of molars where most cavities occur.
- Pediatric dentists have two years additional training beyond dental school and may be a good choice for ongoing care of your special needs child. Their education also includes behavior management, sedation and anesthesia techniques for children when necessary to help them feel comfortable during dental treatment.

### Preparing children for a trip to the dentist

A trip to the dentist can be a scary or intimidating experience for a child. Many children feel anxiety during dental visits when new or uncomfortable procedures are performed. Noises, such as the sound of a drill, can be scary. Not being able to speak (because dental tools are in the mouth) can cause additional stress.

- Plan a pre-appointment visit to the dental office to familiarize the child with the setting.
- Schedule appointments during less busy times; avoid the after-school rush.



*My Healthy Smile*: Created by Fraser and Delta Dental of Minnesota, this interactive CD Rom uses social scripts to teach children about oral health and to ease anxiety of dental visits. It is available along with information regarding children with special needs at [www.fraser.org/products](http://www.fraser.org/products).

A child's first successful dental visit can initiate a positive and productive relationship that provides the foundation for a lifetime of good oral health. It is important for parents and children to feel comfortable with dental professionals. If your child does exceptionally well with a certain hygienist or dentist, ask to see the same person next time. This provides comfort for the child and allows continuity in care as the professional becomes familiar with your child's history and needs.

### Tips to use during the dental visit

Parents and caregivers should always use strategies consistent with how the child is able to communicate and process sensory input. Depending upon the child's needs and sensitivities:

- Use music or movies to calm or distract the child. Some dental offices provide audio or video equipment upon request or allow families to bring items with them.
- Use earplugs to muffle the noises that cause stress.
- Have the child bring along a favorite toy or object of attachment to help alleviate anxieties.
- Have the dental professional use a weighted blanket or X-ray vest to provide comfort to the child.

*Note: Before packing any of these items, parents should contact the dental office to be sure the items will be allowed in the exam area.*

### Using visual communication tools

Visual communication tools empower children by providing alternative ways of communicating.

- Create and use a social script to show your child each step of the exam process. Contact your dental office before the appointment to make sure all steps are represented in the script. (To learn more about creating social scripts, check out the *My Healthy Smile* CD Rom.)
- One common tool is a "break board" which allows the child to express the need to take a break during the dental visit. A break board can be a card with a visual symbol (such as a stop sign) that indicates a break or a board with several symbols representing different choices (such as a stop light with green, yellow and red options).
- Another tool is a tolerance rating scale to communicate discomfort. The scale typically has a range of 1 to 5, or 1 to 10. The child points to the number that corresponds with his/her discomfort level, with lower numbers representing less stress. A similar idea would be to create a scale using a series of faces that are sad, scared or happy - to help the child communicate emotions.

Empowering children can reduce anxiety and prevent negative behavior. Parents should note that it is important for the child to learn how to use any visual supports or communication tools prior to visiting the dentist. If the child has never seen these tools, she/he is unlikely to be able to use them at the visit. Preparation should begin from a few weeks to one month prior to the dental visit, but they can be used throughout the year.

**Sources:** American Dental Association: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org); American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry: [www.aapd.org](http://www.aapd.org); National Foundation of Dentistry for the Handicapped: [www.nfdh.org/services](http://www.nfdh.org/services); Special Care Dentistry Association:

For more oral health information,  
please visit our Web site

[www.deltadentalne.org](http://www.deltadentalne.org)