

Autism at the Dentist?

The profile of a child with Autism can mean that a trip to the Dentist is a potentially frightening event - for both parent and the child. If your AS child can't tolerate being touched at all, if he covers his ears with his hands at slight or sudden noises, if he wears a hat and/or doesn't engage in eye contact, if he's often in a world of his own and doesn't answer questions/requests and if he gets angry, agitated or melts down at smells then the trip to the dentist could be a nightmare!

As parents we know it's important to establish the routine of seeing a Dentist twice a year in an effort to keep our child's teeth healthy. So what can we do to lesson the risk of a full-scale meltdown and totally unsuccessful first visit to the Dentist, thereby setting us up for a miserable time for future dental visits?

Here's some steps that will help:-

- Use a Social Story (Carol Gray) for a week or two before the visit
- Bypass the waiting room and go straight to exam room (this will mean your child with Autism only has to process 1 new environment rather than 2)
- Ask Dentist to talk to you (Mom) rather than the child (eye contact and direct questioning can make an AS child very uncomfortable)
- Tell Dentist about your child's sensitivity to touch PRIOR to visit - advise him to ask before he touches your child's mouth etc
- request Dentist to help child with Autism process the dental surgery by touching/learning how the equipment/chair/tools work
- Remember that your child may feel exposed and vulnerable reclined in the Dentist's chair
- He may also feel dizzy and if he's about to fall over backwards when the chair is reclined, due to his balance issues
- Suggest that the Dentist splits his initial visit into 2 separate visits - one to process the new environment and the other to listen about Dental hygiene and teeth care
- Become Sensory Detectives and look at a visit to the Dentist through your Autism Child's eyes... and ears, mouth, nose and skin

Let your Dentist know that children with Autism are often teeth grinders due to their high anxiety levels. Remember too that you'll have to "teach" your Dentist about all the characteristics of Autism in order for him to be able to fully understand your child, especially the communication issues our children have. Otherwise, when he tells your child to "Hop up onto the chair!" he may get a surprise from your Autism child's literal actions! Having my Ben & His Helmet books in his surgery will help too.

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