

Disability Campaign.org

Dental Care for Children with Disabilities



Image: DrDemetriou.com

Many parents that have children with disabilities struggle to find a dentist willing to treat their child with special needs. Though most children are not fond of dental exams, children with disabilities often show greater aversion towards a visit to the dentist. Your child is more than likely accustomed to routine and may not like meeting new people or the lack of control that comes from sitting in a dental chair. He or she might fear the bright lights in his or her face, the strange noises and the unfamiliarity of a medical office. The good news is some dentists have obtained additional training to educate on how to treat children with disabilities. More than 14,000 dental professionals have completed a course on treating patients with autism.¹ Furthermore, organizations exist to train and equip dentists on disability and oral health.

Dental care is an important component to your child's overall health and wellbeing. There are many different oral conditions that are commonly found in a child with disabilities and chronic illnesses, including those listed below. When not treated, some conditions may lead to further health problems and complications.

Oral Conditions

- **Oral Development** problems include tooth eruption, malocclusion, tooth anomalies, and developmental defects. Tooth eruption may be delayed with children with disabilities. When this happens, the gums might appear red or purple before the teeth erupt. Malocclusion is caused when there is a crowding of the teeth. Tooth anomalies are when the child has variations in the number, size and shape of the teeth.



Image: ArtisticTouchDentistry.com

Developmental defects include discoloration of the teeth and irregular mouth size (too small or wide).

- **Oral Trauma** may result from injuries to the face and the mouth in people who have disabilities. Children with intellectual disabilities or personality disorders with self-injurious behavior can cause trauma to their faces and mouths; others with seizures and ataxia or muscle incoordination are at risk of falls and injuries to the head.
- **Oral Infections** can occur in dental caries, viral infections, early gum disease and gingival growth. Dental caries are mostly found when dental hygiene is poor. Viral infections can be painful and might be accompanied with a fever. Children with impaired immune systems might develop early gum disease. In addition, some medications for your child's disability may cause secondary effects such as gingival growth and thrush (oral yeast infection). Infections that are not addressed might lead to a tooth abscess and cause bacterial to spread, leading to serious health complications for your child.

- **Bruxism**, commonly known as grinding of teeth, can be involuntary or voluntary. Some children grind their teeth during the day, while others do so in their sleep. Though mild bruxism usually requires little to no treatment, frequent or severe teeth grinding can lead to headaches, jaw disorders and tooth damage.



Image: ArnoldBalderDDS.com

Preparing for your child's dentist appointment

Because your child's oral health contributes to his or her overall wellbeing, it's important that you visit a dentist regularly. Here are some tips on how to make trips to the dentist more tolerable and safe, as well as less stressful for you and your child.

- Communicate with the front desk before making an appointment. Explain to the receptionist that your child has a disability and may need accommodations while there.
- Consider visiting the dental office before going to the appointment. If your child is in a wheelchair or uses a mobility device, make sure there is ample space. Some dentist offices have an open, airy design to help patients not feel as claustrophobic or have TVs and audio players to entertain patients.
- Bring a printed list of the medications your child takes. Make a list of any allergies, previous procedures or surgeries and write down his or her doctor's contact information.
- Bring a toy, blanket, soothing music or headphones to make your child feel comfortable.
- See if your child can meet the dentist or at least visit the office in advance before the scheduled exam.
- Talk to your child about the dental visit. Read a children's book about a visit to the dentist, show pictures or find an online educational video suitable for your child.



Image: PortlandsLittleSmiles.Com

To find a dentist in your area who treats patients with special needs, go to <https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/resource-guide>, select the state; then, under the Health Services category, select “Dentist.” You can also visit the Special Care Dentistry Association and its “Special Care Dentist Referral” page at <http://www.scdonline.org/?Referral>.

Joni and Friends can assume no liability in the recommendation of any product, service or organization, nor does this constitute an endorsement.

© Joni and Friends, 2015

Used by permission of **Joni and Friends**

P.O. Box 3333, Agoura Hills, CA 91376

www.joniandfriends.org

¹ Saint Louis, C. (2014, October 20). For Children with Autism, Opening a Door to Dental Care. *The New York Times*, p. D1. Retrieved October 23, 2014, from http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/20/for-children-with-autism-opening-a-door-to-dental-care/?_r=0