

Healthy Teeth and Special Needs Children: What Parents Need To Know



According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1 in 5 households in the U.S. include at least one child with a special health care need. Given that many general dentists don't treat children with special needs, parents and caregivers may find it challenging to find a dentist to care for their child. This may be one of the reasons that dental care is the leading unmet health care need among children with special needs, according to the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center. So, what do parents and caregivers need to know in order to ensure healthy little teeth and overall well-being for children with special needs?

Pediatric dentists are the best resource for oral health. Pediatric dentists are the dental professionals of choice for children with special needs. All pediatric dentists are trained in the care of patients with special needs. Beyond dental school, pediatric dentists have 2-3 years of specialized training in areas such as addressing anxiety related to dental visits. Talk to your pediatric dentist about best-practice recommendations that can help better meet your child's specific needs. For example, many products, such as floss holders, fluoride rinses and adaptive aids for toothbrushes are available to help a patient with special needs prevent tooth decay and gum disease.

Find a Dental Home early! The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recommends visiting a pediatric dentist by your child's first birthday – or when the first tooth appears to establish a Dental Home, or home base, for your child's dental needs. Parents and caregivers of special needs children often have concerns about their child's

tolerance of a dental appointment, but postponing the visit is not the answer. Pediatric dentists recognize that each child is unique and may need extra care to feel comfortable. They are familiar with a variety of approaches and look to parents or caregivers to select the best approach for the specific health and behavioral needs of each child. For example, according to the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network, research shows that patients with autism do particularly well if they can see the same staff and same dentist for every appointment. Furthermore, as a result of their experience and expertise in helping patients with special needs, pediatric dentists are often the best choice for the dental care of adults with special needs as well.

Tooth decay is almost 100 percent preventable. Unlike many of the health conditions faced by patients with special needs, tooth decay is mostly preventable. Children with developmental problems have a greater chance for bite problems, such as crowding, bite and poor jaw position. Additionally, children who experience delays in growth and development may also take longer to get their baby teeth and adult teeth. A pediatric dentist will be able to identify any issues early on and provide a recommendation for care. All children benefit from a preventive approach – proper brushing and flossing, limited snacking, and regular visits with a pediatric dentist.

Practice makes perfect. Often, children with special needs require more assistance and practice in taking care of their teeth. For example, children with autism might have sensory issues that can make proper dental hygiene challenging and brushing teeth difficult because the sensation can be uncomfortable at first. Parents might want to start by using the toothbrush to touch your child's lips or just inside the mouth.

The First Visit: Expert Insights from a Pediatric Dentist

Finding appropriate dental care for a special needs child can be a challenge for parents – and it can also be an afterthought when dealing with other pressing health issues. Dr. John Hendry, a pediatric dentist in private practice in Lafayette, Louisiana and national spokesperson of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), has extensive experience treating patients with special needs and says helping families with special needs children is a major focus of his work.

As a young adult, Dr. Hendry watched a friend's family struggle because of the special needs of one of their children and it made a major impression on him. Since then, he has dedicated his practice to helping special needs children get the care they deserve and educating and supporting their families.

Dr. Hendry says, "It's important that parents bring their children in early so that we can be doing preventive work versus treating problems which might require uncomfortable procedures for potentially sensitive special needs children." Below, Dr. Hendry shares his top tips and recommendations for special needs children and their families to ensure their first visit to a pediatric dentist by age one is a positive experience for the whole family.

- **Find a pediatric dentist who makes you and your child comfortable.**

"Pediatric dentists are like the 'Pediatricians of Dentistry' and have specialized training to treat children with special health care needs," states Dr. Hendry. You can find a local pediatric dentist by using the pediatric dentist finder on mychildrensteeth.org or ask your pediatrician early on for a referral to a local pediatric dentist.

- **Provide your pediatric dentist with information about your child prior to the first visit.**

“Make note of anything about your child that could help the visit go smoothly,” says Dr. Hendry. Pre-visit is the perfect time to ask questions, voice concerns and make sure that you and your new pediatric dentist are on the same page.

- **Prepare yourself and your child for the first visit.**

“Stay positive and make your child excited about the visit. You can even start to prepare them early by saying we’re going to visit an old friend next week and then drive by the office to show them where you’ll be going,” says Dr. Hendry. Be sure to read the information your pediatric dentist sends in advance of your appointment so you know what to expect and can prepare your child.

- **Make dental health a priority at home from day one.**

Special needs parents may be dealing with multiple, significant health needs in their children, but Dr. Hendry says it’s important not to let oral health slip to the back burner. Parents can help their children become familiar with great oral health when they are very young by wiping their gums with a wet washcloth and ensuring they don’t take bottles to bed filled with sugary drinks. Dr. Hendry adds, “Consistent routines that promote oral health and drinking water throughout the day can be important measures in helping keep teeth clean at home.”

It’s never too early to think about the health of your child’s teeth. “Reach out to a pediatric dentist and let them help you care for the special needs of your child,” says Dr. Hendry.