Dental health guidance for parents and caregivers of children with special health care needs

As partners, you, your child's dentist, and their physician can make sure your child with special needs can achieve the best dental health possible. Together you can make a difference!

Scheduling a dental appointment

All children should have their first visit to a dentist within six months after their first tooth comes into the mouth, or by one year of age (whichever comes first).

Visit myCigna.com® to locate a dentist in your area. You can also ask your child's doctor to help you find a dentist and verify on myCigna.com that they are in your dental plan's network.

Some people find it helpful to know what to say when calling the dental office to schedule an appointment. Here are some ideas.

- Hi, my name is _____. I am calling to schedule an appointment for my child _____.
- My child has special needs. My child has _____.
- Are you the person I should speak with about my child's needs, or is there someone else available in your office I can speak with?
- My child does best when _____.
- My child is afraid of _____.
- My child will feel more comfortable in your office if _____.
- In the past, my child had a successful dental visit when _____.
- In the past, my child had a hard time at the doctor or dentist when _____.
- Ask questions related to your child's specific physical circumstances. Examples: Are there stairs? Is there an elevator? Where is parking located?
- Does the dentist have experience working with children with special needs?

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Before the dental appointment:

- Ask the dentist if you can bring your child to see the dental office before the date of the dental appointment.
- Complete any questionnaires that the dental office provides.
- Talk to your child about going to the dentist. Use words your child will understand and a positive or neutral tone of voice. Avoid using terms such as “shot” and “drill.” Sometimes pictures or books help to explain what will happen.
- Offer suggestions to the dental office to help create a successful visit. Be clear and specific about what will help your child at the appointment. Share past dental experiences, positive and negative, with the office staff.
- Schedule the dental appointment for a time of day that is best for your child, if possible.
- Let the dental office know that it may take longer to treat your child.
- Tell the dental office the name of your child’s physician.

Day of the dental appointment:

- Bring a list of all medicines your child takes, including vitamins and supplements.
- Share with the dental staff the most successful way to talk or communicate with your child. Tell the dental office your child may want to hold your hand or a stuffed animal.
- Bring your child’s favorite toy, blanket or stuffed animal.
- Tell the dental office things your child might do and the best way to deal with that. Suggest things that make your child feel good.
- Let the dental office know if your child is sensitive to bright lights, sounds, touch or other stimuli.
- Ask for help about different toothbrushing ideas that will make taking care of your child’s teeth at home easier.
- Bring a list of any questions you may have about your child’s teeth, oral hygiene, diet, and growth and development.
- Tell the dentist you would like to talk about any treatment before it is done.
- Ask whom you should call or where you should go if your child has a dental problem and the dental office is closed.

Keeping teeth and gums healthy

Regular brushing with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing are key steps to maintaining good oral health. The dentist and their staff are trained to recommend a daily oral care plan for your child to follow. Here are some tips for making oral health care at home a little easier for you and your child.

1. Help them feel safe.

Create a safe oral health care environment at home. You know your child best. First, look for any potential issues in your surroundings that may trigger specific behaviors. For example, if your child reacts to bright lights, dim the lights when possible, or move to an area that is more calming to your child. Speak softly and remember to praise your child at every stage of their oral health care routine.

Schedule oral care at home twice a day and always at the same times. This will help set a simple pattern that your child can follow for a lifetime.

Find a comfortable position. Position yourself behind your child as they sit or stand in front of a mirror so you can use the same motions that you'd use to brush your own teeth.

2. Show them how it's done.

Demonstrate brushing and flossing of your own teeth. Go slowly, and explain what you're doing and why. Encourage questions.

3. Practice opening wide.

Help your child to open their mouth wide and keep it open. Praise them along the way.

4. Get them used to the toothbrush and floss.

Before brushing begins, touch the toothbrush to your child's lips, gums and teeth. If sudden mouth closure is a concern, consider using two toothbrushes. Use the handle of one brush to prop open one side of their mouth, and use the other brush to clean the opposite side of their mouth. Be cautious about the use of a power toothbrush because it may be too stimulating for your child. Use a soft toothbrush, and brush softly and gently.

Move on to flossing, if possible. Use waxed floss and a floss holder, applying as little pressure as possible while still cleaning between teeth. If using regular dental floss is not possible, try using a water flosser or a floss pick. Go slowly and gently as you explain what you're doing.

Don't force it. If they become too agitated, stop. Do this calmly while praising them repeatedly for how much they've achieved. Try again later.

Explain—and soothe—as you go. Explain everything you're doing in a quiet, calm voice, and pause if they seem agitated or overwhelmed. Hum or sing a soothing song.

5. Use an appropriate toothpaste and the right amount.

Children up to age six should be helped by an adult in brushing their teeth. Some older children may continue to need assistance.

Fluoridated toothpaste provides the best protection against tooth decay. If your child is sensitive to toothpaste textures and flavors, have other options available, or speak to your dentist about alternatives. If your child doesn't like a toothpaste flavor or foam, it may be helpful to try different toothpastes until you find one your child likes. If your child does not like foam from toothpaste, choose one that does not contain sodium lauryl sulfate.

Amount of toothpaste by age:

- Children under age three: If your child is at risk of developing tooth decay, as identified by a health care provider, use only a small amount of fluoridated toothpaste (the size of a grain of rice).
- Children age three and older: Use a pea-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste.

6. Let the brushing and flossing begin!

You've shown your child how to do it; now let them take charge of the brushing and flossing at whatever pace feels comfortable for them.

Here are some other tips for a healthy mouth:

- Ask your doctor for prescriptions without sugar to help prevent tooth decay (cavities). Use over-the-counter medicines that do not have added sugar.
- Have your child rinse with water after taking medications that may cause dry mouth, which increases risk for tooth decay.
- Avoid offering your child sugary snacks and drinks (e.g., juices, pop/soda), and avoid using them as rewards. Look at labels on food products for words ending in "ose," such as "fructose" and "sucrose," and limit their use.
- Do not share utensils, cups, or toothbrushes with your child to avoid passing the bacteria that can cause tooth decay.
- If your child uses a pacifier, do not dip it in honey or sugar. Clean it only with water.
- Know what is normal in your child's mouth. Lift the lips away from the teeth for a better view of your child's teeth and gums. Look often.
- Do not serve juice in sippy cups, just in open cups. If you need to put a child to sleep with a bottle, fill it with water only.
- Use seat belts, stair gates, bike helmets and mouth guards to prevent injury to the teeth and face.
- Take your child to the dentist for preventive visits as recommended based on their risk for tooth decay. Ask the dentist about dental sealants and fluoride treatments to protect your child's teeth from tooth decay.

Here are some additional resources:

Autism Speaks

- Preparing for the Dental Visit | Autism Speaks
- Dental Tool Kit | Autism Speaks

Special Olympics

- Special Smiles Brushing and Flossing Guide | Special Olympics

National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research

- Dental Care Every Day - A Caregiver's Guide | National Institutes of Health

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