

Desensitization

Some people with intellectual or developmental disabilities may have significant anxiety about going to the dentist or other medical providers. This may result in uncooperative behavior and difficulty complying with office procedures. Desensitization techniques and a gradual approach to learning to tolerate dental or other medical procedures may be necessary. This will involve a series of short visits to the provider.

Each visit should involve practicing a specific behavior and should end on a positive note.

For example, these are steps to follow to prepare for visiting the dentist:

1. The first visit, go to the dentist's office and enter the waiting room, and then leave.
2. The second visit, do the parts in step 1, and add walking into the exam room.
3. The third visit, do the parts in steps 1 and 2, and add sitting in the exam chair for 5 seconds.
4. At other visits, work on extending the time spent sitting in the exam chair (30 seconds, then 1 minute, then 5 minutes, then 10 minutes...)
5. After tolerating sitting in the exam chair, practice sitting in the exam chair and opening his/her mouth
6. Next time, practice sitting in the exam chair while allowing the dental hygienist to count his/her teeth
7. Next time, practice sitting in the exam chair while allowing the dental practitioner to brush his/her teeth

Similar steps could be practiced for going to the doctor, including:

1. Waiting in the waiting room for increasing amounts of time
2. Going into an exam room
3. Waiting in an exam room for increasing amounts of time
4. Putting on a gown in the exam room
5. Having the blood pressure cuff put on and then removed
6. Having the blood pressure cuff put on and inflated a small amount, then removed



During each step, an individual may require distraction. Also remember to provide rewards to the individual for completing each step successfully. This technique builds familiarity with settings that can be challenging, and it can increase the comfort level and tolerance of the individual.



Reference:

Adapted from *Treating Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Toolkit for Dental Professionals*, Autism Speaks resource. Accessed 3/21/17 at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/docs/sciencedocs/atn/dental-toolkit.pdf>