

A New Design of Relaxing Dental Office Environment for Children with Autism

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One of the most challenging situations that parents with children with autism have is to take them to the dentist's office for dental treatments. Children who have autism do not like others to come close to them or touch them; consequently, this situation creates an obstacle for dentists to manage these children. On the other hand, a friendly dental environment and kind dentists or staff, may not resolve the problem.

Autistic children when entering an unfamiliar environment would feel insecure. They react to these new surroundings and do not tend to cooperate and sometimes they even become aggressive.

It should be said that in many cases, there are many problems during the first visit. For example, special smells, a tray of dental instruments and devices and tools may pose a threat to the peaceful world of these children.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recommends several basic behavior guidance techniques to help a child, such as Tell-Show-Do, voice control, nonverbal communication and positive reinforcement. Unfortunately, these traditional strategies may not help dentists with the behavioral management of autistic children. Hence, it seems a new approach to resolve this problem is needed. That is why this idea made a group of colleagues involved in a new study to find a way to reduce anxiety in children with autism.

In a new study, researchers tried to create a safe space for children with autism. With the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) support, Como and her colleagues wanted to evaluate the sensory adaptations to the dental environment that may help to reduce anxiety and fear in children with autism.

The authors described how the collaboration of dental clinicians and occupational therapists could create a sensory-friendly experience for children with autism. They believed the application of strategies including removing bright lights and loud noises, playing light and relaxing music and even covering children with a soft blanket that may give them a feeling of mother hug, would create tranquility affection.

For purpose of this study, the USC team developed a story with real-life photographs of a child receiving dental care. Before the dental visit, the USC group suggested parents read the stories to their children to help them prepare for the upcoming dental procedures. The visual aids that explain the dental procedure by steps would help these children to be ready for dental visits.

We should keep in mind that new environments and unpredictable conditions can create discomfort surroundings for autistic children. Therefore, planning modifications to the dental environment or adaption of dental protocols could reduce child sensitivity before the clinic visit, or even help a child with the emotional condition during dental treatments.

Although Como and her colleagues are still evaluating the strategies' effectiveness, the good news is that parents have reported that the strategies had a positive effect and the success of their child's oral care. Como also suggests the clinicians should look for parents who are experts in this issue and are experienced well with the behavioral management of their autistic children.

Finally, Como stated: "Interdisciplinary collaboration can bring numerous insights, and so many factors of our health are interconnected -- our interventions should be as well" [1,2].

Bibliography

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