

A Trip to the Dentist

For any child, going to the dentist can be a scary experience. For a child who experiences sensory sensitivities, a visit to the dentist may be an overwhelming experience. The following are common sensory experiences to consider when taking your child to the dentist. Your child may be sensitive to only a few sensations or they may be sensitive to all. In addition it is important to consider your child's communication and understanding of what will happen. Work to make the visit as positive and predictable as possible.

1. Vision

- Bright light shining directly on the child's face

2. Sound

- The sounds of the dental equipment; drills, polishing brush, suctioning of saliva, etc.
- Unexpected noises such as intercoms, door alarms, beeps

3. Touch

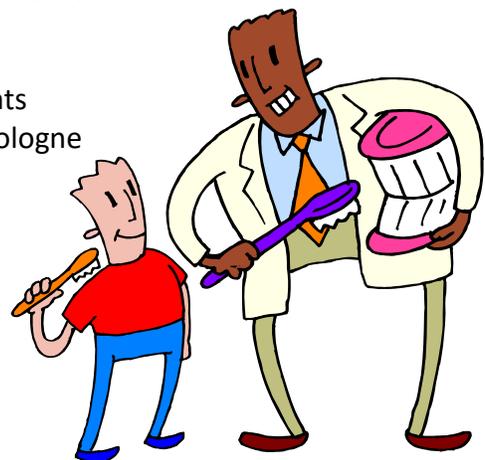
- Unexpected touch from the dentist (face, mouth, gums)
- Light touch from the dentist; light touch often can be experienced as painful
- The feeling of the gloves against the face, mouth and/or gums
- The feeling of the dental tools, x-ray equipment or water spray

4. Smell

- The smells of the cleaning solution and/or cleaning agents
- The smells of the dentist's perfume and/or aftershave cologne
- The smell of toothpaste
- The smell of the dental gloves

5. Taste

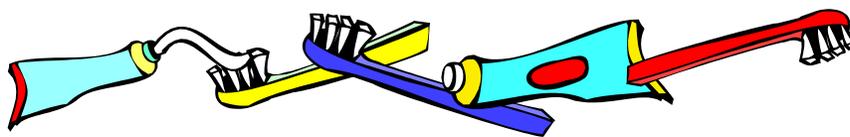
- Dental glove
- Dental polish or fluoride (due to texture and taste)
- Dental tools or x-ray materials



6. Head and Body Position

- Some children are unable to clearly process their positioning space when their head is tilted out of the upright position and their feet are not on a stable base; this may cause fear/panic.

The range of reactions to these sensations includes gaze aversion, physical withdrawal, blocking of the stimuli, vocal outburst, aggressive behaviors and/or tantrums. It is very important that you talk to the dental staff about sensory sensitivities and tell them about your child's specific sensitivities.



Intervention Strategies for Sensory Sensitivities

1. The dental staff should be informed about the importance of using firm touch rather than light touch when touching the face and mouth. If light touch must be used, follow it with touch pressure to reduce the negative effects of the light touch
2. The firm touch pressure from the x-ray vest may be calming; wear the vest throughout the examination to reduce the effects of sensory sensitivities
3. Ask if they can decrease the brightness or amount of light to create a more calming environment
4. Ask if there is toothpaste or cleanser with no smell or taste
5. Ask if there are gloves that can be used that are less likely to have a smell or taste
6. Listen to music through headphones while in the dentist chair
7. Wear sunglasses to block the bright light
8. Bring a fidget toy to manipulate while sitting in the dentist's chair
9. Bring the child's favorite item from home (blanket, stuffed animal)



Prior to the Visit

1. Prior to the visit provide whole body actions such as jumping on a trampoline, swinging, jogging, animal walks, etc. Any physical activity that is centering and calming can be helpful.
2. Provide deep pressure before the visit such as squishes or a massage. This input has an organizing and calming effect for up to 2 hours.
3. Suck on a popsicle/freezer or ice cube on the route to the dentist. Cold is calming and helps desensitize the mouth. Chewing on a chewy tube or sucking through a straw may also be very calming.
4. Ask your dentist whether using Sensodyne toothpaste on your child's teeth and gums before the visit would be helpful to reduce sensitivity.

Preparing for the Visit

1. Use visual supports to help your child understand where he is going and if possible what to expect when he is there. Consider using a mini-schedule during the visit.
2. A social story, video model or "going to the dentist" book may be helpful to read repeatedly for a week or two before the event.
3. If it is your child's first visit to the dentist, consider making a trip or two previous to the appointment. Go in and simply visit the waiting area and read the social story. Ask whether you can have your child simply sit in a dental chair. Expectations for a first visit may simply be to open mouth and allow someone to "count your teeth" or even look in their mouth without touching it.

