

Special Health Matters

Oral Health Care

♥ How important is oral health care for children and youth with special health care needs?

Developmental disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and mental retardation that are present during childhood or adolescence can last a lifetime. They affect the mind, the body, and the skills people use in everyday life: thinking, talking and self-care. People with disabilities often need extra help to achieve and maintain good health. Oral health is no exception.

♥ Do children and youth with special health care need dental care every day?

Everyone needs dental care every day. Brushing and flossing are crucial activities that affect our health. In fact, dental care is just as important to your child's health and daily routine as taking medications or getting physical exercise. A healthy mouth helps people eat well, avoid pain and tooth loss, and feel good about themselves. Like everyone else, people with developmental disabilities can have a healthy mouth if these three steps are followed:

- **Brush every day**
- **Floss every day**
- **Visit a dentist regularly**

Taking care of someone with a developmental disability requires patience and skill. As a caregiver, you know this as well as anyone else does. You also know how challenging it is to help that person with dental care. It takes planning, time, and the ability to manage physical, mental, and behavioral problems. Dental care isn't always easy, but you can make it work for you and your child.

♥ How do I get started?

Location—the bathroom isn't the only place to brush someone's teeth. For example, the kitchen or dining room may be more comfortable. Instead of standing next to a bathroom sink, allow the person to sit at a table. Place the toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, and a bowl and glass of water on the table within easy reach.

Behavior—Problem behavior can make dental care difficult. *Try these ideas and see what works for you.*

- ♥ At first dental care can be frightening to some people. Try the "tell-show-do" approach to deal with this natural reaction. **Tell** your child about each step before you do it. For example, explain how you'll help him or her brush and what it feels like. **Show** how you're going to do each step before you do it. Also, it might help to let the child hold and feel the toothbrush and floss. **Do** the steps in the same way that you've explained them.
- ♥ Give your child time to adjust to dental care. Be patient as that person learns to trust you working in and around his or her mouth.
- ♥ Use your voice and body to communicate that you care. Give positive feedback often to reinforce good behavior.
- ♥ Have a routine for dental care. Use the same technique at the same place and time every day. Many people with developmental disabilities accept dental care when it's familiar. A routine might soothe fears or help eliminate problem behavior.
- ♥ Be creative. Some caregivers allow their client to hold a favorite toy or special item for comfort. Others make dental care a game or play the child's favorite music. If none of these ideas help, ask your client's dentist or dental hygienist for advice.

♥ Resources

National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research

www.nidcr.nih.gov (source)

Special Olympics Special Smiles

http://www.specialolympics.org/Special+Olympics+Public+Website/English/Initiatives/Healthy_Athletes/Special_Smiles/default.htm