

## 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 is a gradual approach to learning that increases tolerance of dental or other medical procedures. This involves a series of short visits to the provider, and creates a positive experience during and following each step.

**At each visit: practice a specific behavior, make it fun, and 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 the 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, make it fun by allowing the individual to have a preferred activity such as listening to their favorite music, playing with an iPad, or giving verbal encouragement. Provide rewards to the individual for completing each step successfully. This technique builds familiarity with settings that can be challenging, and can increase the comfort level and positive experience 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>

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