



Say “Aah”: Successful Trips to Medical Providers

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Many adults fear medical and dental treatments to the point that they put off necessary visits. People with disabilities may be even more prone to experience anxiety before or during these appointments due to the strangeness of the environment and discomfort of procedures. If a person’s health has been neglected or their symptoms have escalated (e.g., due to side effects of medications or poor nutrition), they may be dealing with ongoing pain, lasting damage, or other impacts on their overall health. In this case, more intensive methods may be necessary. When people are highly resistant, sedation is often recommended for common treatments (e.g., gynecological exams, dental cleanings, blood work), posing additional health risks and increased cost for treatment. These circumstances commonly contribute to significant behavior problems among people with disabilities and stress for their families and support staff. We offer the following suggestions for making medical and dental visits more positive and increasing people’s cooperation.

Know What to Expect

Before making an appointment, visit the office and talk to the staff about the person’s needs. Note the characteristics of the waiting and examination rooms and learn about routines and procedures the person may undergo. If possible, observe these. Specific questions you might consider include:

- *With what items or objects will the person be asked to interact?*
- *With whom will the person interact (e.g., receptionist, nurse, physician, hygienist, therapist)?*
- *What procedures are likely (e.g., will the visit include just a physical exam or will other procedures be performed)?*

Inform the staff of the person’s anticipated reactions given their history with dental and/or medical situations or related experiences. Discuss any modifications the staff might be willing to make (e.g., items you would be allowed to bring to make the person more comfortable). Ask if any of the tools that are typically used (e.g., gowns, syringes, dental mirror, scopes, lights) might be available for practice at home. Recognize other ways you might prepare the person for the experience (e.g., practicing exams).

Prepare for the Visit

Many challenges associated with going to medical or dental appointments can be avoided or minimized through careful planning and advanced preparation. If possible, you should take the person to the office prior to their scheduled appointment to see the environment, meet the staff, and possibly observe certain procedures (e.g., while you are undergoing them). During the visit, you may identify additional triggers and strategies that could help. If this visit cannot occur, you can use the

information you obtained from the office to prepare the person in other ways. If the person is experiencing pain or going to undergo an uncomfortable experience, talk with the staff in advance about all possible adaptations to procedures and/or pain management. Help the person understand the value of medical treatment and problems associated with neglect by sharing stories and pictures. Make health maintenance (e.g., brushing teeth, monitoring diet) part of your normal routine so the person becomes accustomed to these activities.

Prepare the person for the visit using social stories, communicating with the person at a level he or she understands. Your story can include every step that will occur during the appointment, what the person will be expected to do, what help you and the staff will offer, and what will occur if the visit is successful. Bring enjoyable items and activities that can serve as distractions such as electronic devices, toys, or blankets. Steps such as these may make the experience more positive.



Teach and Practice Skills

When faced with uncomfortable or awkward treatments, we don't want to just tell people what not to do (e.g. don't move), we need to teach them what to do. Using the following basic steps of teaching, we can help them get oriented with procedures and practice new behaviors in a calm environment: 1) clarify expectations, 2) specify expected behaviors (explaining why they are necessary), 3) model skills, 4) provide practice opportunities, and 5) reward effort. One way to teach is to 'play doctor or dentist' at home. While role playing, guide the person to ask for breaks or communicate in other ways when talking isn't possible (e.g., squeezing parents' or support

staff's hand). Use a timer to increase the length of time the person is able to remain in the required position for the exam. Allow the person to manipulate the tools that will be used. Teach slow deep breathing, thought distraction, and appropriate ways to move (e.g. wiggling toes) to help the person tolerate the actual procedures. These skills may take time to learn, especially when someone is fearful and therefore repeated opportunities to practice may be helpful.

Reward Cooperation

There are strategies that can be used to further increase and maintain the person's cooperation with the procedures. Praise the person when sitting still, following instructions, and doing other things that are expected. Provide the person with preferred little items (e.g., fidgets, comfort items) following each procedure or stage of the visit. If procedures are awkward or uncomfortable, provide brief breaks following periods of cooperation and/or when the person requests them (i.e., not following challenging behavior). Let the person know what has been accomplished and what still needs to occur as the visit progresses. Once they complete the visit, provide the "jackpot." Give the person a special treat (e.g., new toy, special activity). Depending on the person, you may choose to tell them that these positive consequences will be available (i.e., "if you do __, we will __) or wait until after the appointment to avoid repeated requests.

Clearly, it is important to work closely and collaboratively with medical or dental providers and their staff to help people have successful experiences. They may be able to offer additional suggestions and you may share ideas they can use with other patients. Given this relationship, it may be necessary to hand-pick providers who are willing to be flexible and supportive, showing your appreciation for adjustments they are willing to make (e.g., waiving cancellation fees if a person has difficulty). Medical and dental visits may be stressful for you as well. When you celebrate the person's successes, make sure you reward yourself also.