



**New York State
Developmental Disabilities
Planning Council**

Strategies for successful medical and dental office visits:

**Suggestions from New York State individuals
with disabilities and caregivers**

~

Deborah A. Chapin & Robin Worobey

~

**New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council
(DDPC)**

Most caregivers have experienced some level of stress when making or attending a doctor/dentist visit with a child with a disability. Individuals with disabilities also have a difficult time at the doctor's and dentist's office. There are ways to make this process easier as the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (DDPC) recently found out from a statewide electronic survey. The DDPC is a state agency that explores new ways to promote and support initiatives for New Yorkers with developmental disabilities and their families. Individuals and caregivers suggested that the DDPC carry out this survey and disseminate the information gained to others to make their office visits less nerve-racking.

The DDPC conducted the survey of individuals with disabilities, parents, grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, residential caregivers and other caregivers in November of 2007 to determine the supports they need and strategies they use to make a successful doctor/dentist visit. Approximately 230 individuals and caregivers from across New York State responded, providing some interesting and innovative ideas about making the medical/dental visit less stressful and easier to manage.

The survey was made up of four open-ended questions and one ranking question. The open-ended questions helped to gather a wide range of information from individuals and caregivers about their strategies, needs,

and concerns that arise when they visit the doctor or dentist. Four questions asked about the kinds of supports they've had available to make their doctor/dentist visit successful, the tools and strategies they've used, and suggestions they had for office staff to help make the visit more pleasant. Individuals and caregivers were also asked to rank ten statements about their office visit needs and wants by order of importance.

The people who responded gave a lot of great tips for both doctors/dentists and individuals and caregivers to use. And they reported a lot of common strategies and concerns. The responses consisted of suggestions for making appointments, making waiting time easier, and talking to doctors about the individual's needs. The responses contained suggestions in two categories: what individuals, families, and caregivers need from doctors, dentists, and other office staff, and what they can do for themselves.

The tables below contain the top ten suggestions in each category. To make remembering easier, you can print and cut out these tables. Laminating them will preserve them as a pocket guide for future use.

What we need from doctors, dentists, and other office staff	
1.	Doctors, dentists, and staff have an understanding of disabilities and the anxiety that individuals may have about medical/dental visits
2.	Treat individuals and caregivers with the same respect and dignity as others receive and recognize unique family strengths
3.	Have short wait times and a low stress, quiet environment, with special or separate waiting rooms
4.	Speak directly to the individual
5.	Allow extra time for the appointment
6.	Listen to caregivers' and individuals' expressed needs
7.	Share complete and unbiased information with families
8.	Allow caregivers to be present during visit and ask them questions when needed
9.	See the individual as a person with unique needs, not as a "disabled person"
10.	Make appropriate referrals and timely follow through with paperwork

What we can do for ourselves	
1.	Prepare the individual for doctor/dental visit through role-play, books, and pictures, etc.
2.	Bring distractions for waiting and exam rooms (books, music, video games, snacks, etc.) and offer rewards (prizes, outings, edibles, etc.)
3.	Ask for a “get acquainted” visit
4.	Schedule appointment at a time that is best for the individual, such as the first or last appointment of the day
5.	Keep a medical/dental journal of co-payments, medications, treatments, prior visits, and referrals
6.	Make sure the parking lot, building, and office are accessible
7.	Talk to the doctor/dentist before the visit, preparing staff ahead of time, and reminding them of the individual’s needs
8.	Bring a support person to listen to doctor, write things down, and help with other children
9.	Research medical/dental issues in books, journals, and online, and ask lots of questions
10.	Ask for the same doctor/staff each time

New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (DDPC)

Other suggestions offered by individuals with disabilities and caregivers to health care professionals include being patient when an individual needs more time to speak or perform tasks and to speak calmly, slowly, and directly in view of the individual. Doctors and dentists can flag patient charts to alert staff of an individual’s needs and send paperwork to the caregiver ahead of time so that less time is spent in the office. Individuals and caregivers also wanted to have doctors, dentists, and other professionals communicate with each other to coordinate services for the individual.

Individuals and caregivers suggested that families ask for pre-sedation methods for individuals who are very anxious about the doctor/dentist visit. Families can also make a list of questions before the visit and, if the doctor is running late, ask to leave and come back when the doctor is available.

The New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council is a federally funded state agency working under the direction of Governor David A. Paterson, State of New York. The DDPC is responsible for developing new ways to improve the delivery of supports and services to

New Yorkers with developmental disabilities and their families. The Council focuses on increasing the opportunities for consumers to become more involved in the community, secure education, employment, and housing. DDPC programs promote personal choice and assist individuals with disabilities in exercising control over their lives. This means that individuals are given the opportunity to make their own decisions in such areas as education, employment, and housing. To a large extent, DDPC programs are developed in direct response to the concerns and ideas voiced by consumers, families, services providers, policymakers, and other professionals.

For more information about the DDPC, please visit the agency website at:

<http://www.ddpc.state.ny.us/>

**New York State
Developmental Disabilities
Planning Council**

**155 Washington Avenue
Second Floor
Albany, NY 12210**

(518) 402-7505

July 2008