Strategies to Manage Sensory Overload for Neurodivergent Patients

May 8, 2025

CareQuest Institute for Oral Health®

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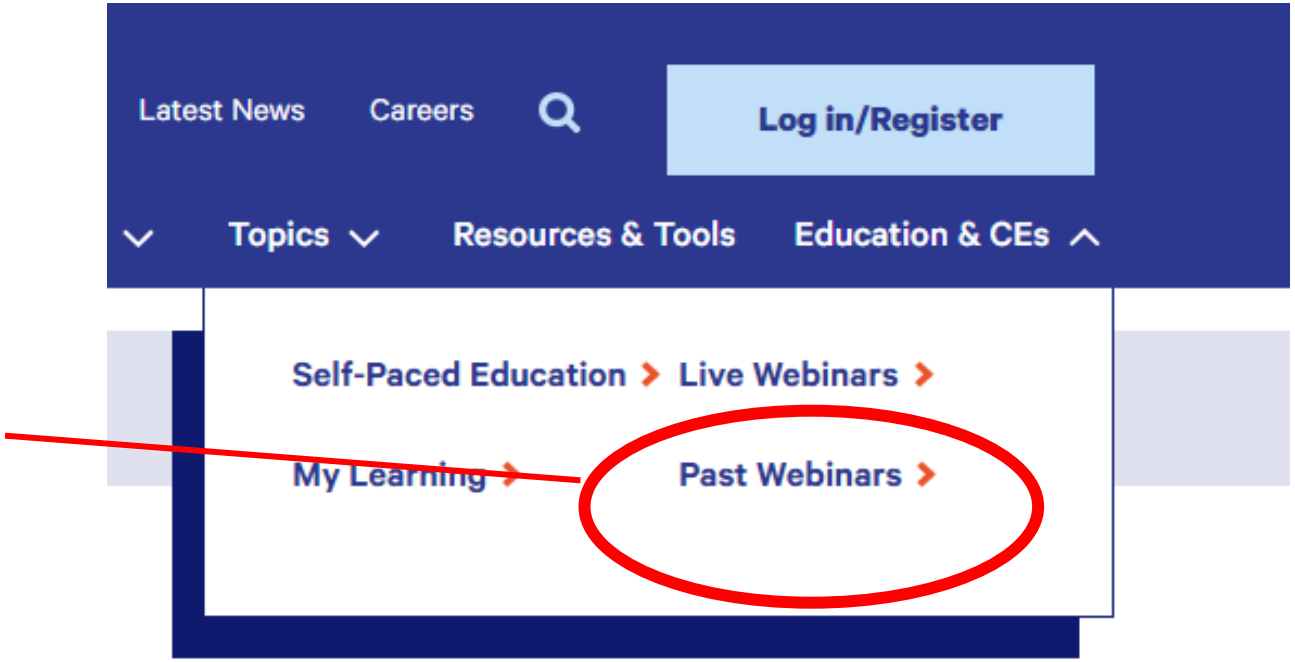

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- We will turn to your questions and comments toward the end of the hour.

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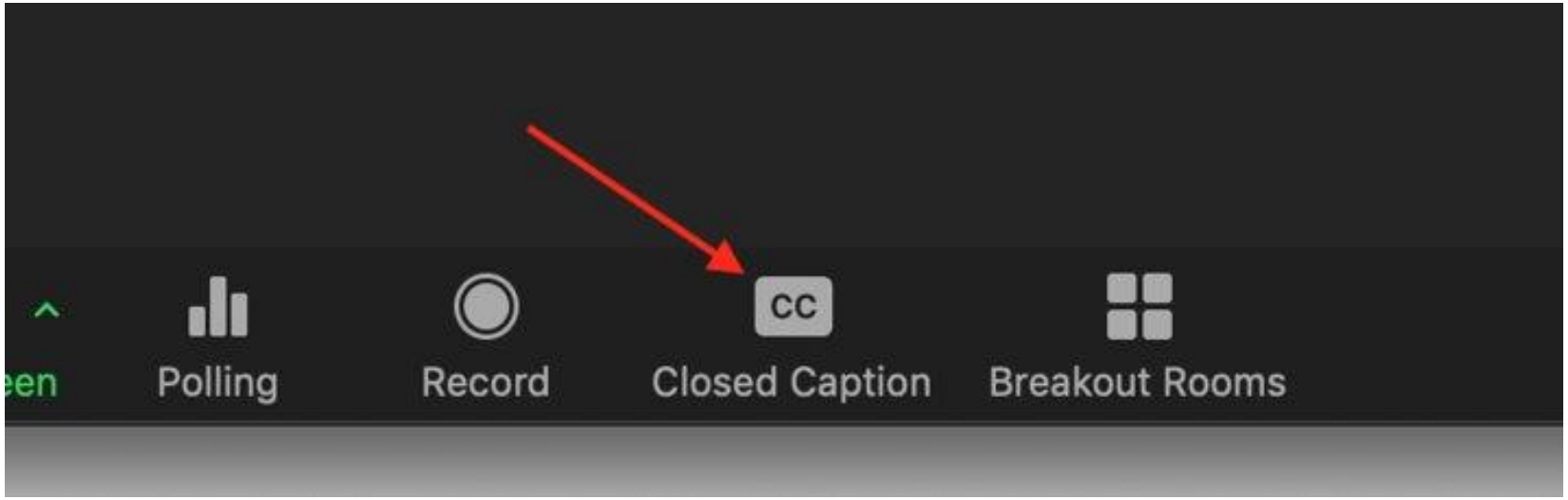

CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

Webinar

Strategies to Manage Sensory Overload for Neurodivergent Patients

Thursday
May 8, 2025

7-8 p.m. ET

1 CE Credit

Moderator

Kim Attanasi, PhD, MS, RDH, BCMAS, FADHA
Haleon

Presenter

Lisa B. Stefanou, MPH, BS, RDH
NYU College of Dentistry

Presenter

Jacob Dent, DDS, FADI
Dental Desensitization Systems

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- Dr. Kim Attanasi our moderator, is employed by Haleon, a company with commercial interests in the dental and oral health industry.
- The moderator (Dr. Attanasi) has not influenced or contributed to the development of this webinar's content, as affirmed in the Conflict-of-Interest disclosure.
- This webinar is designed to ensure objectivity and scientific integrity, with all content developed independently of commercial influence.

Learning Objectives

- **Identify** common sensory stimulators in dentistry that can be barriers for effective dental care, particularly for patients with neurodivergence.
- **Describe** prevention and management strategies to create a sensory-safe environment in dentistry.
- **Review** current dental workflows and identify areas for more compassionate and inclusive care.

Poll Questions

1. **Does your practice offer sensory-sensitive accommodations for patients?**
   a) Yes, we offer them to all patients
   b) Yes, we offer them to patients who request them
   c) No, but we are exploring and would like to
   d) No, not right now

2. **Which of the following sensory accommodations does your practice currently offer?**
   a) Noise-canceling headphones
   b) Dimmed lighting
   c) Weighted blankets
   d) Extra time/tailored scheduling
   e) Other
   f) All of the above
   g) None

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Jacob Dent, DDS, FADI
Co-Founder Dental Desensitization Systems Professional Speaker
Special Needs Dentist

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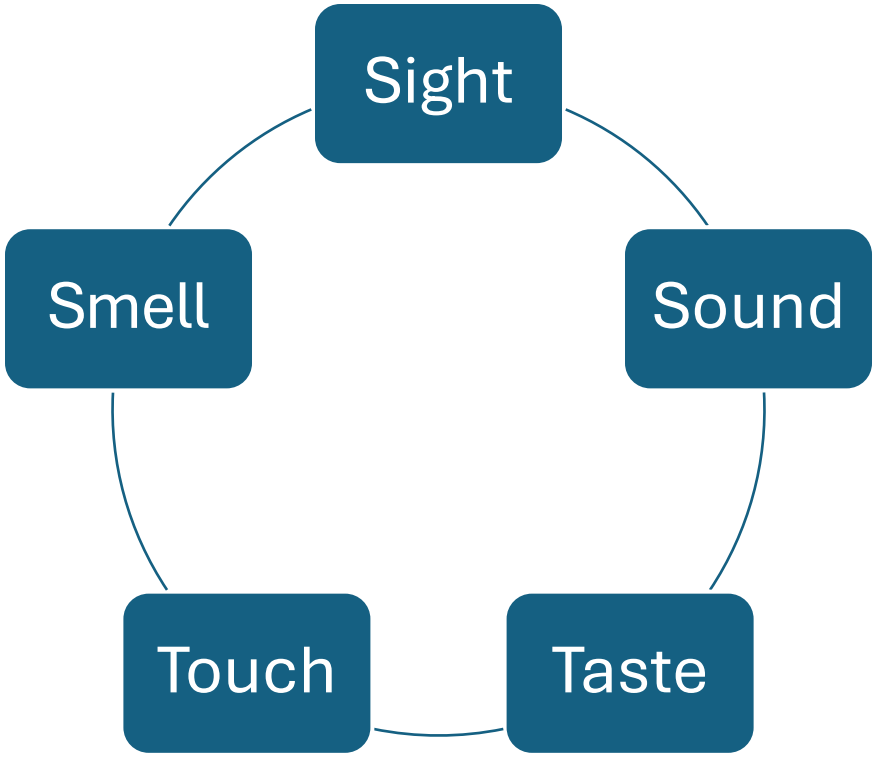
Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a concept where neurological differences are seen as natural variations of the brain. These neurological differences are recognized, respected, celebrated, and allow people to be themselves.

Neurosensitivity

How people perceive and process internal and external sensory stimuli.

8 Senses



- **Proprioception** (muscles and joints)
- **Vestibular** (balance and movement)
- **Interoceptive** (what's going on inside)

Sensory Overload

- Happens when you are getting more input from your senses than your brain can sort through and process

- Triggers fight, flight, or freeze mode

Common Causes of Sensory Overload

- Loud noises or music
- Crowded spaces
- Drastic environmental changes (temperature, light, etc.)
- Unexpected or unwanted physical contact (hugs, etc.)
- Tactile triggers (scratchy or uncomfortable clothing, etc.)
- Intense smells

Sensory Sensitivities in the Dental Office

Sound: Difficulty tolerating loud or high-pitched sounds (e.g., hand piece, office music)

Sight: Discomfort from bright or flickering lights

Touch: Aversion to certain textures (e.g., bib, instruments in the mouth, prophy paste)

Taste: Avoidance of certain taste (e.g., any dental material or toothpaste flavor)

Smell: Difficulty tolerating unpleasant and unfamiliar smells (e.g., dental materials, cologne, perfume)

Vestibular (balance and movement): Discomfort with movement (e.g., laying back in dental chair)

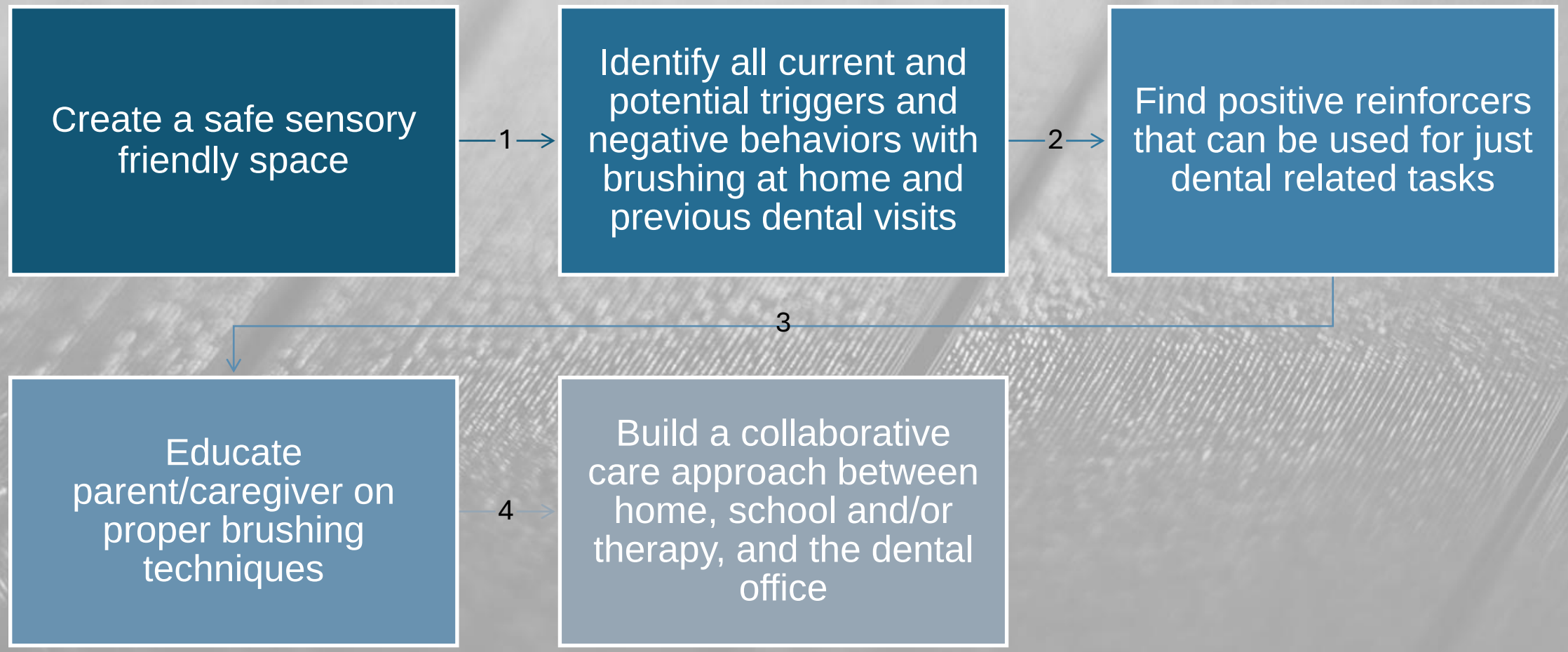
Proprioception (body awareness): Difficulty maintaining certain postures (staying still in the chair and keeping mouth open)

Interoceptive (internal body signals): Challenge in perceiving internal body signals (e.g., difficulty recognizing and communicating feelings of pain or discomfort during a dental procedure)

Inclusion

The practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or intellectual disabilities and members of other minority groups.

How To Do This in Your Practice



“We must adapt our environment and delivery of care to meet our patients where they are instead of making them adapt to us.”

Dr. Jacob Dent

Sensory Rooms

- Flexible seating
- Screens with sensory games
- Toys
- TV
- Non-restrictive
- Optional music/quiet
- Adjustable lighting

Sensory Operatories

- Handi-accessible space
- Room for caregiver seating/modeling (if applicable)
- Sensory items (e.g., trampoline, canoe, TV)
- Optional delivery systems

Sensory Operatory- Desensitization Room

Getting to Know You Questionnaire

Getting to Know You

Patient name:
_____

Parent/guardian/caregiver name:
_____

Describe the patient's disability:
_____
_____
_____

Is the patient on a special diet? yes ___ no____
Type of foods patient likes to eat regularly:
_____
_____

Does the patient have any physical challenges that the team should be aware of? Example: In a wheelchair, delayed fine motor skills, uses a walker:
_____
_____
_____

Has the patient visited the dentist before?
yes____ no____
If yes, when was the last visit?: _____

Please describe the experience for both caregiver and patient: _____
_____

Describe the patient's at-home dental care:
How frequent does the patient brush?
_____

Does patient need brushing assistance?
yes ____ no ____
Manual toothbrush? yes ____ no____
Electric toothbrush yes ____ no ____
What flavor of toothpaste do they prefer?
_____

How frequent does the patient floss?
_____

Does the patient need flossing assistance?
_____

How often does the patient use mouthwash?
_____

Does the patient have any issues spitting?
yes ____ no____
Is fluoride/varnish ok to use on patient?
yes ____ no ____
Who aides the patient during their homecare routine?
_____
_____

Where is the brushing performed and in what position? Example: in bathroom/standing or in bedroom/lying on bed
_____
_____
_____

Does the patient have any challenges with brushing and flossing at home? yes ____ no ____ if yes, please describe:
_____

Can the patient communicate verbally?
yes____ no ____
If yes, is communication level age appropriate?
yes ____ no____
If no, what age level are they at? _____
Are there any certain cues that might help the dental team? Example: hands quiet, mouth quiet
_____
_____

Does the patient use non-verbal communication? yes ____no ____
If yes, please describe:
_____
_____

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NYU | DENTISTRY

Strategies to Manage Sensory Overload for Neurodivergent Patients

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Clinical Associate Professor, Director
NYU College of Dentistry
Department of Dental Hygiene and Dental Assisting

Stimuli That Challenge the Neurodiverse

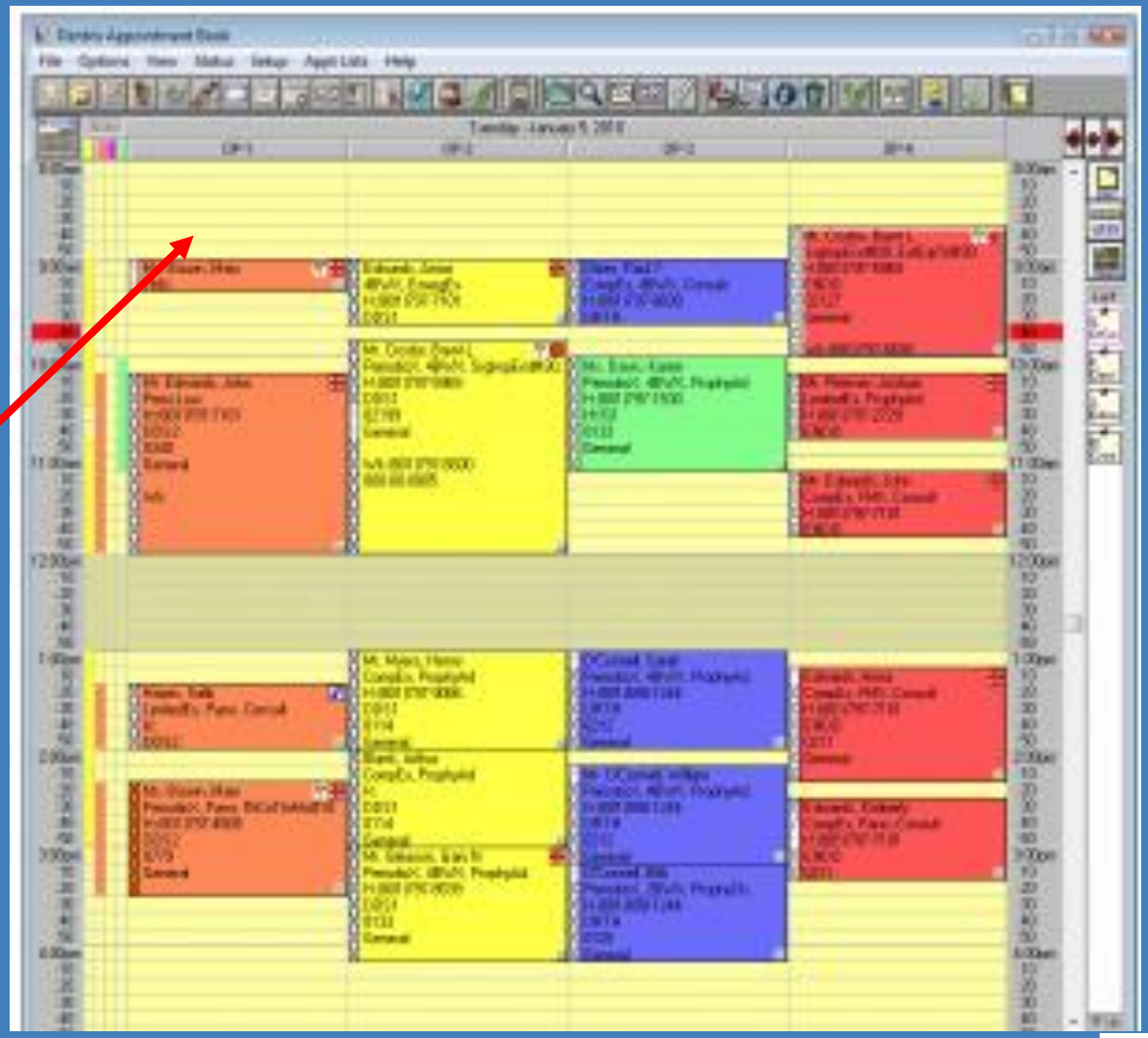
There is probably no place in the world where the majority of the senses are stimulated more than a dental office.

General Recommendations for Scheduling

Mornings are generally better:

- First appointment of the day is ideal
- Minimal wait time to get into room
- Office is quiet and calm
- Staff are fresh and happy
- Less noise

9:00 AM



Sensory Adaptive Environment

Strategies to **mitigate sensory difficulties,** such as reducing specific sights, sounds, odors, or other stimuli.

The introduction of the following can d**iminish adverse patient reactions** and result in a positive experience.

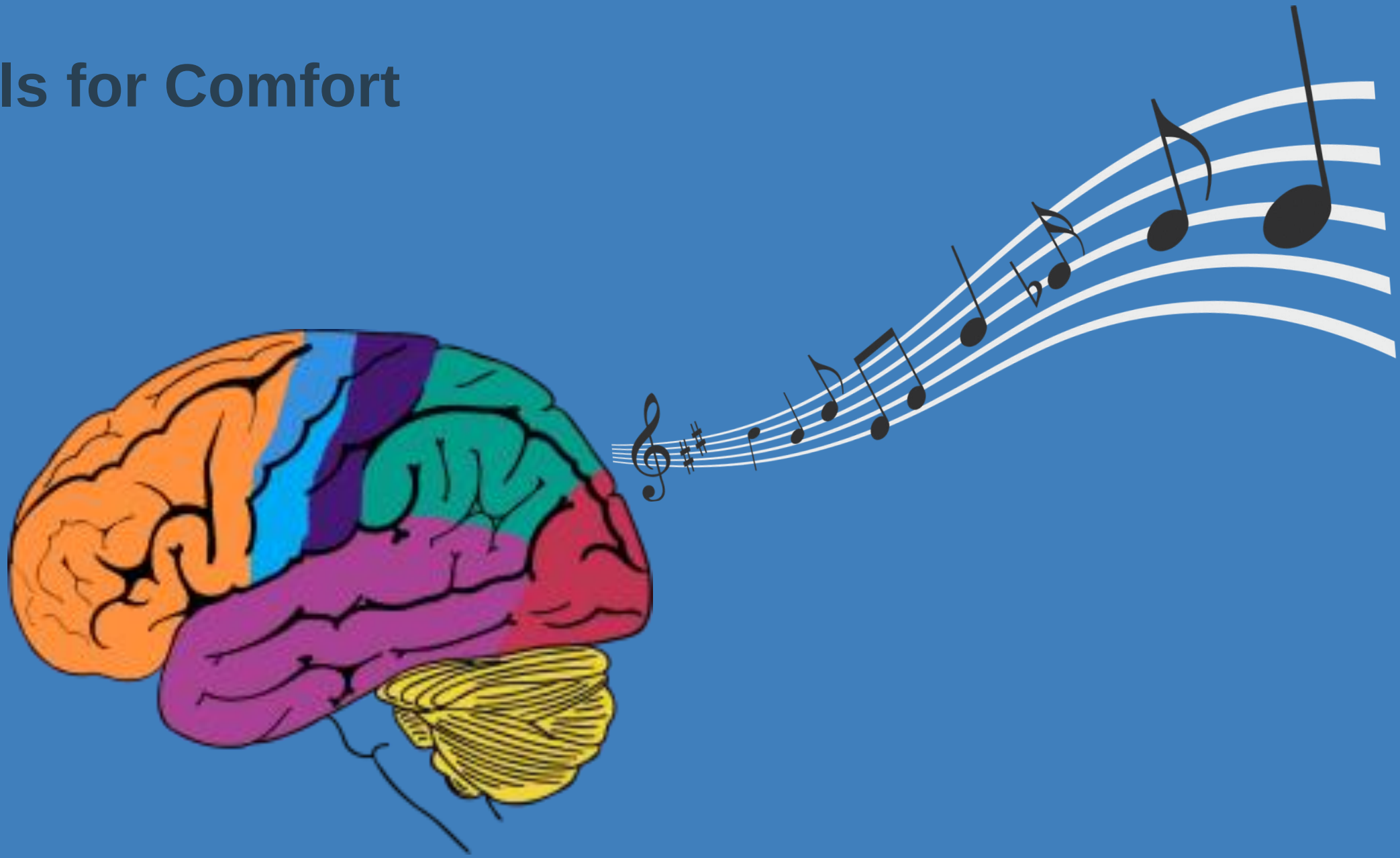
- **Relaxing light conditions**
- **Rhythmic music**
- **Deep pressure in the dental setting (such as weighted blanket)**

Parents and caregivers can be asked to bring the patient's favorite music, videos, melodies, cartoons, etc. to the appointment.

Lighting

- Flexible lighting
  - Relaxing light conditions
  - Dimmable lights
  - Low-noise policies

Tools for Comfort



Strategies

- When it comes to managing overstimulation, reduce exposure to bright lights and use noise-cancelling headphones.
- Taste sensitivity can be managed by asking about flavors.
  - Have patients bring in their favorite toothpaste.
- If a patient is tactile sensitive, have them bring in a favorite blanket or stuffed animal.

Practical Tools and Support

Sensory Tools and Resources

- Fidget tools, stress balls, or tactile items
  - Provides focused, soothing sensory input

- Weighted blankets or vests
  - Offers calming, deep pressure input

Practical Tools and Support

- Noise canceling headphones or ear plugs
  - To reduce overwhelming sound input in noisy areas

- Sunglasses, brimmed hats, or dimmed lighting
  - Helps reduce light sensitivity

Practical Tools and Support

- Visual Schedules or Routines
  - Reduces unpredictability, a common trigger for sensory overload

Practical Tools and Support

- Pumice paste vs. flavored paste vs. pasteless prophy angles
  - Figure out which one the individual prefers

- Fluoride rinses vs. fluoride varnish

Practical Tools and Support

- Use of topical anesthetics
- Use of nitrous oxide
- Alternative x-ray technique/strategies for traditional x-rays

Building Trust with Patients and Caregivers

Strategies

- Consistency in care
- Empathy and active listening
- Sharing the plan for the visit

Building Trust with Patients and Caregivers

Following up for ongoing care:

- Schedule future appointments with consideration for patient comfort (e.g. same time allotment, time of day, or same team member).

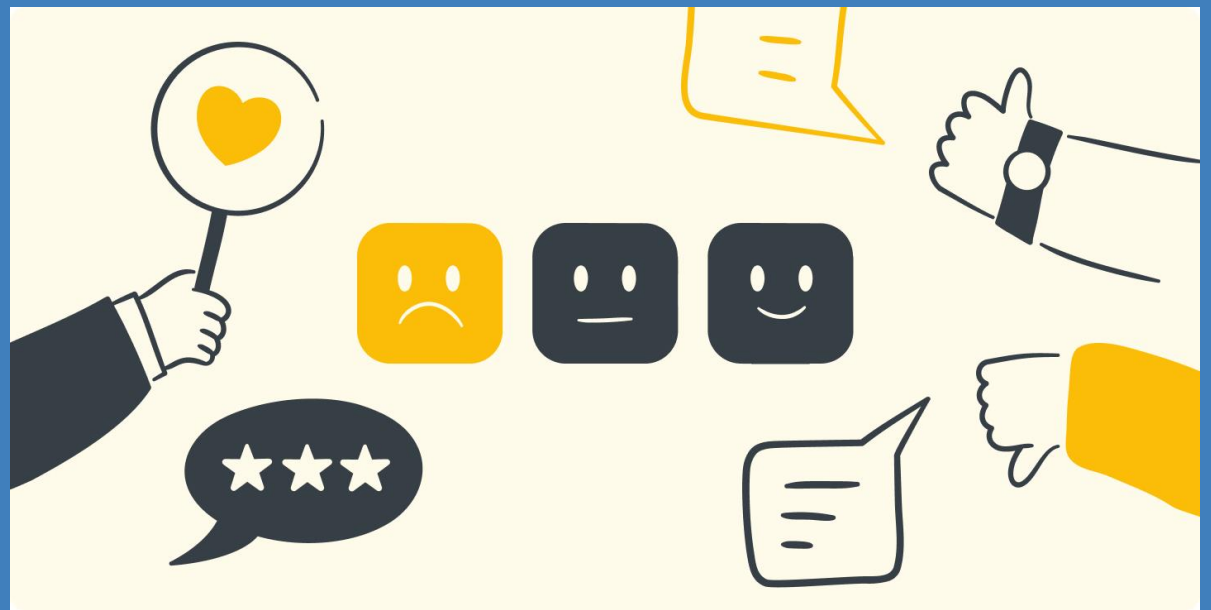
- Behavioral notes are imperative to ensure continuation of techniques that were successful and discontinuation of those that were not.

- Send follow up emails or place calls to check in on patient well-being and gather feedback.

Building Trust with Patients/Caregivers, cont.

How to implement changes based on feedback:

- Create an open dialogue with patients and caregivers to encourage ongoing communication about their needs.
- Regularly review feedback data in team meetings to inform adjustments in processes and practices.



Team Based Approach: A Recipe for Success!

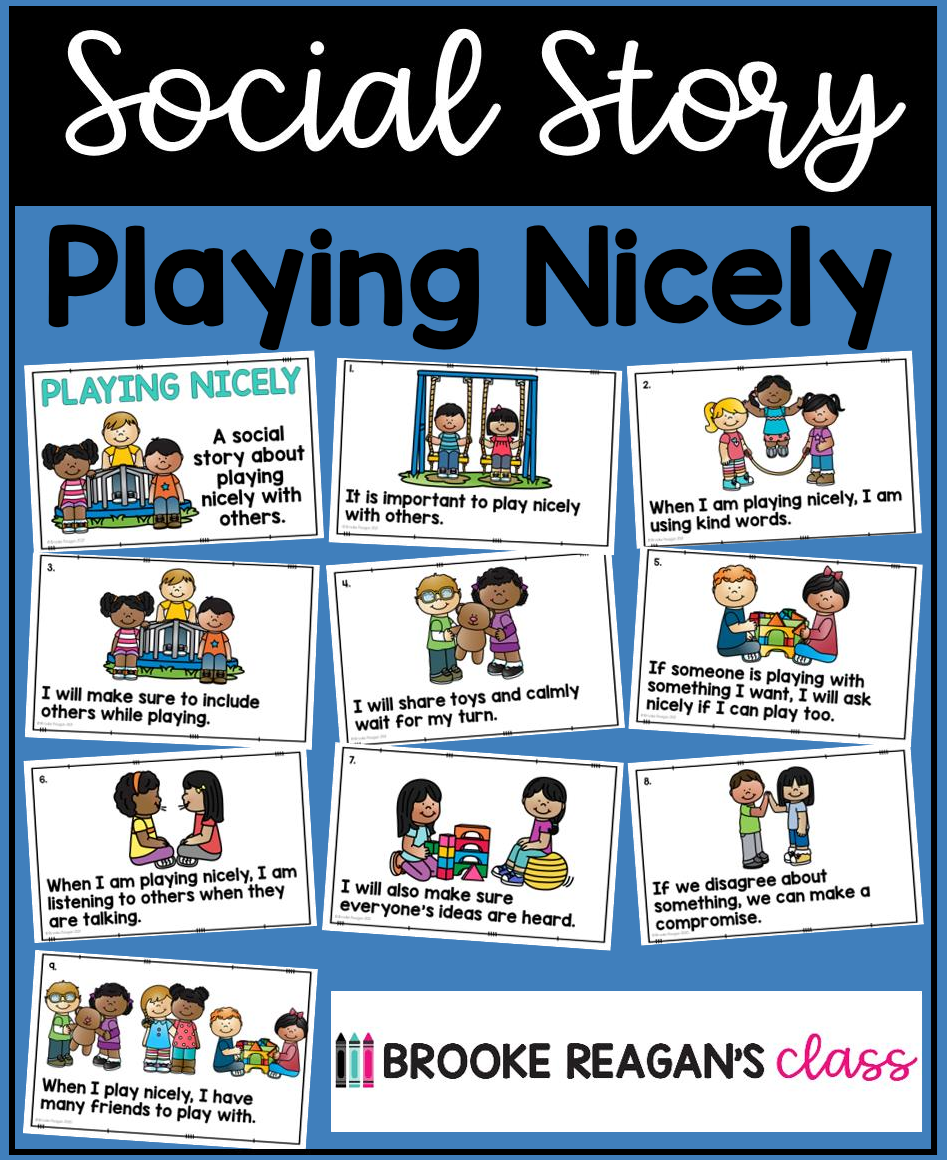
- Collaboration among all dental staff to support patient needs.
- Each team member plays a designated role in aspects of care.
- Team communication: huddles or team meetings regularly to facilitate information sharing and strategies.

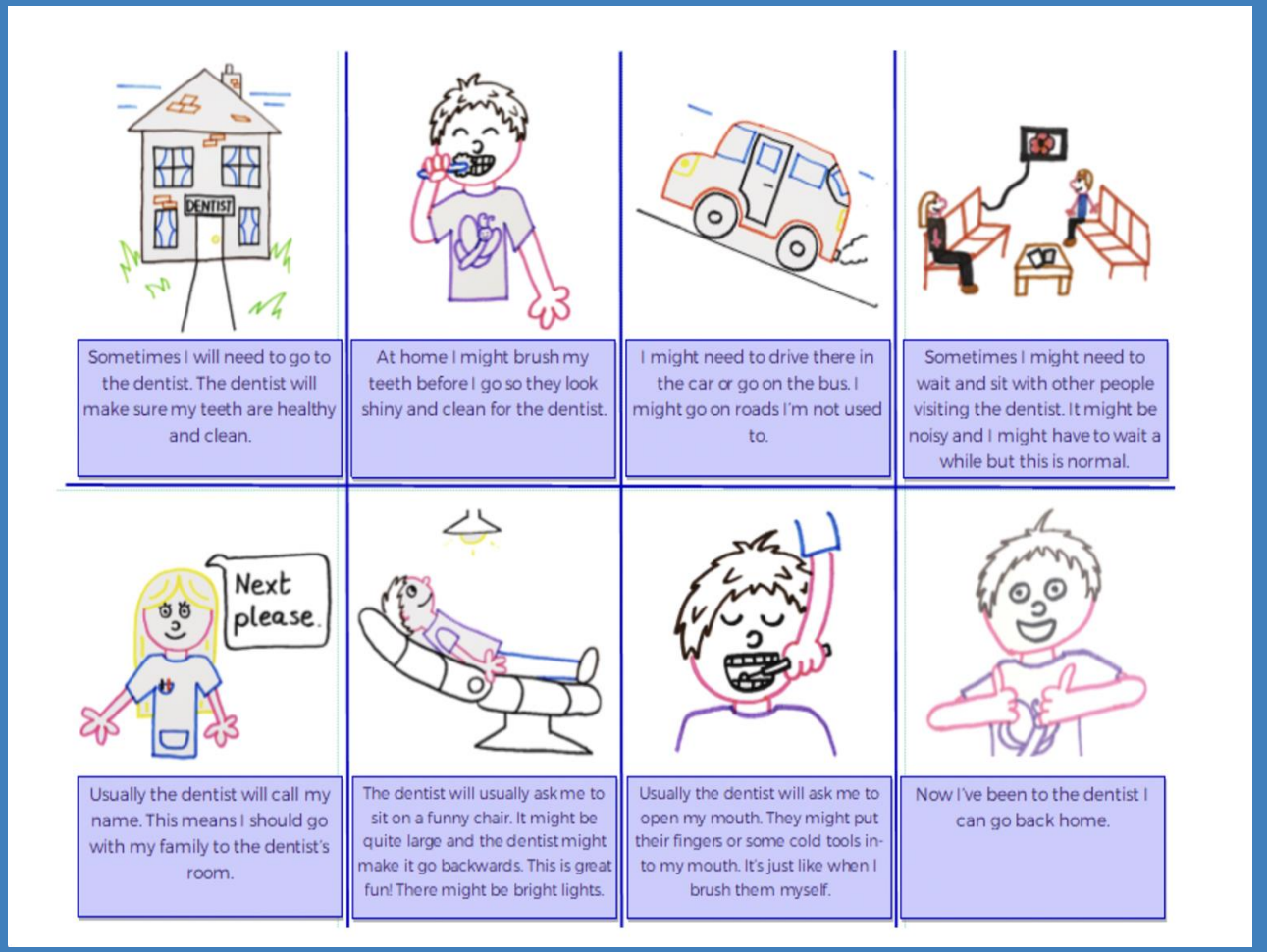
Social Stories

Social stories are a great tool to help young people better understand and interact within the world around them by providing a unique story which explains the scenario.

Social Story: Going to the Dentist by Brooke Reagan | TPT

Social Stories





https://www.caudwellchildren.com/using-social-stories-helping-autistic-children-understand-social-cues/

What the Dental Team Needs to Know

Every smile is unique, every brain is, too!

Key Takeaways

- With the right support and personalized care from the dental team, most neurodivergent children and adults can achieve and maintain good oral health.

- For those with hypersensitivities and dental anxiety, some interventions can help:
  - Visual aids
  - Technology – gaming apps
  - Checklists
  - Timers

- These can help patients and caregivers maintain a good, daily oral care routine and build positive associations with brushing and flossing.

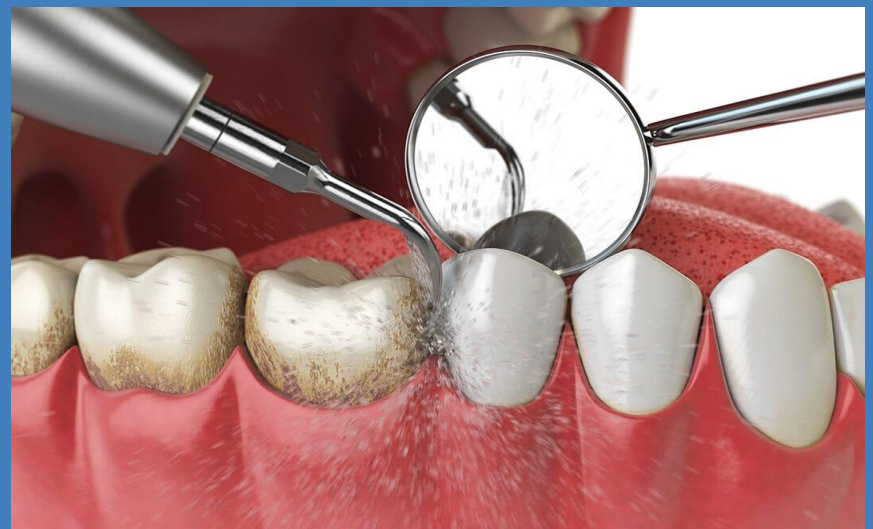
Strategy

- Some neurodivergent individuals may find it helpful to use different toothpaste or toothbrushes while others may prefer brushing their teeth in a quiet room or with calming music playing.

- It may be more productive to encourage them to brush when they are in a cheerful and cooperative state, rather than requiring brushing to take place strictly in the bathroom.

Strategy

- It is advisable to ask the patient about their individual preferences, as these can vary significantly from person to person.
- Emphasizing **personalized care** over a one-size-fits-all-approach ensures that interventions are more effective and aligned with each patient's unique needs.
- Regarding ultrasonic instrumentation versus hand scaling, these patients may express a preference for hand scaling.



Conclusion

- Compassionate care is individualized, respectful, and flexible.
- Neurodiverse patients can thrive in dental settings with the right strategies.

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Poll Question

After this webinar, how likely are you to provide sensory-sensitive care in your practice?

a) We already do and this was a helpful refresher
b) We already do, but we will update some of our practices
c) I'm not sure, and I would like to learn more
d) Not likely, but maybe in the future

Question and Answer

Submit questions for the panelists in the **Q&A box**

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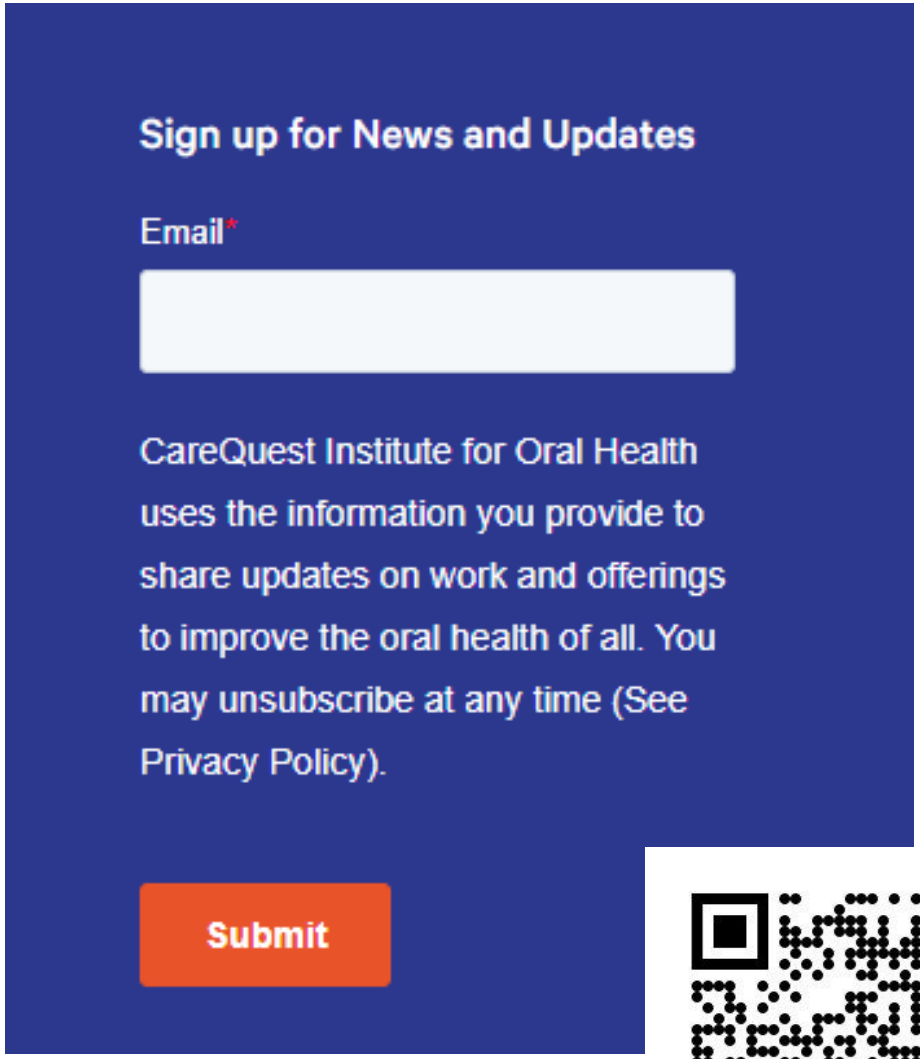
Webinar Evaluation

Complete the evaluation by **Friday, May 16** to receive CE credit. You will receive a link to the survey in 24 hours.

Next Webinar:

Practical Periodontal Diagnosis Classification: A Guide for Everyday Clinical Use on **May 22 at 7 p.m. ET**

And we invite you to take a minute to sign up for our newsletter to get more information on future webinars!



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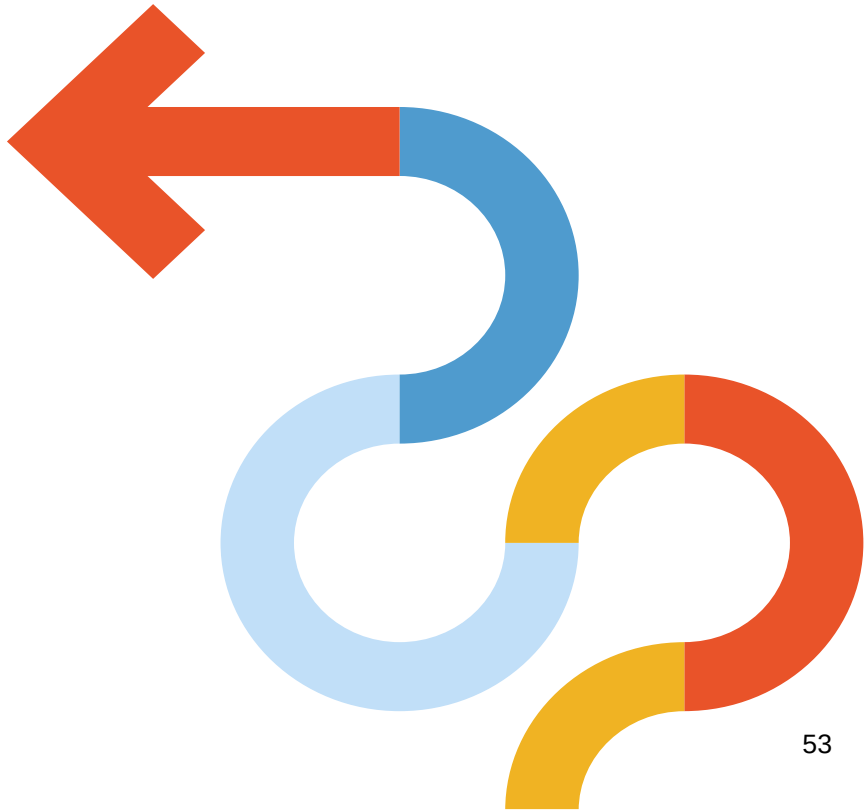

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