

## Special Focus: Dentistry for Children with Special Needs



*The following Q&A was provided by Dr. Elizabeth Bortell, Director of Pediatric Dentistry at Children's Hospital of Richmond. Dr. Bortell oversees a comprehensive dental program that serves all children, including those with special needs.*

### **What is a pediatric dentist?**

A pediatric dentist is a dental specialist who focuses on the oral health of infants, children and adolescents. A pediatric dentist has two to three additional years of advanced training through a pediatric dental residency, beyond the four years of training to become a dentist. A pediatric dentist is also trained to treat medically compromised patients and patients with special needs.

### **Do all dental practices treat children with special needs?**

No, not all practices treat children with special needs. Most practices that provide comprehensive care to children with special needs are staffed by a pediatric dentist. Pediatric dentists are trained during their residency, to meet the medical and dental health needs of children with complex medical, physical or mental disabilities who often have unique dental needs and challenges.

Special needs dentistry is not a specialty of dentistry. For the most part, the only people who have specialized training to treat people with special needs are pediatric dentists and some adult dentists who have completed a hospital-based general practice residency.

### **What is sedation dentistry?**

Often, very young children, children with anxiety, medically fragile children and children with behavioral issues require some form of sedation to assist in dental treatment. Oral, intravenous and nitrous oxide sedations are commonly used to facilitate treatment that cannot be completed with the child fully alert. General anesthesia is another option for sedation that is often rendered in an operating room of a hospital.

### **How are parents involved in decision-making related to when sedation is appropriate for dental procedures?**

A parent should be very involved in the decision making process regarding sedation. The dentist should inform the parent of sedation options such as conscious sedation, deep sedation or general anesthesia.

Conscious sedation is a drug induced depression of consciousness that allows the patient to respond to physical stimulation and verbal commands while maintaining an unassisted airway. Deep sedation is a drug induced depression of consciousness during which patients cannot be easily aroused, but are able to maintain an unassisted airway. General anesthesia is a drug induced loss of consciousness during which patients cannot be aroused by physical or verbal stimulation and require an assisted airway.

A dentist will also inform the parent which option is more appropriate based on the patient's unique medical or behavioral issues. Ultimately, it is the parent who gives the consent for treatment.

### **What are specific issues parents of children with behavioral issues, autism and anxiety should consider when selecting a dentist and/or obtaining dental care?**

The most important consideration in selecting a dentist to treat a child with behavioral issues, autism or anxiety is the dentist's training and experience with such children. A pediatric dentist is trained to meet the needs of children with behavioral issues and anxiety. A parent should contact the dental office and ask questions regarding the dentist's training, and the number of children with behavioral or special needs that are treated in the practice. Often, offices that are hospital based treat many patients with behavioral issues, particularly if they provide treatment with the use of general anesthesia.

