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MOMMY MINUTE

Dental Groups, Hospitals Offer Special Care for Autistic Kids



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When Jackson Faraci was young, he struggled during visits to the dentist. Fear and discomfort overwhelmed the South Windsor boy who has autism. Now 14, Jackson has made great strides since he began visiting Special Care Dental Services, which opened in 1997 in New Britain to assist underserved children in the community. Hygienists and doctors

associated with Hospital for Special Care were trained about two years ago to work with kids who have autism. The clinic is an example of how the medical and dental communities have responded to a growing awareness of the developmental disorder.

"I think it's like any other child but more intense in a child that is autistic," Dr. Monica Wolff, a dentist, said of anxiety surrounding dental care. First, she sends a bag of supplies to the new patient's home, so he can become comfortable with the mask, gauze and floss. Children can visit the small clinic multiple times prior to an appointment. Stuffed animals and tablets are welcome. Wolff alerts the child to any noisy equipment and encourages him to feel the spinning, whirring brush on his fingers before his teeth. Sometimes children are non-verbal. Wolff watches body language and relies on a parent — who might be sitting on the dental

chair holding a son or daughter's hands — for insight into the child's comfort level.

Hospital for Special Care is known for its autism programs. The hospital opened a new eight-bed inpatient unit last December, the first in the state and one of only 10 such facilities in the country. "The majority of our kids will come from the emergency room after having had a significant episode of behavioral challenge, a lot of times self-injury or aggression, destruction," says CEO Lynn Ricci, noting that the programs stabilize these youths. During Autism Awareness Month, the hospital is also calling attention to its Spectrum of Kindness (www.spectrumofkindness.org), an online community about the disorder. "It's building empathy and understanding and giving people a place to go to share their stories," says Ricci. "It's been a big success."

Over the years, Wolff has encountered

teens with autism whose dental health suffered because they'd never seen a dentist. She advises parents not to be afraid to expose their young children to the experience. Carin Faraci, Jackson's mother, is proud of her son's progress and grateful to the dental specialists at SCDS.

"It's a lot easier for him than it used to be," she said.

For information about Special Care Dental Services, visit www.hfsc.org and watch Monday's Fox 61 Morning News.

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