

Communication on the subject of, before, during and after a visit to the dentist

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Introduction

A visit to the dentist will generally not be considered pleasant. Furthermore, it is a visit that occurs only occasionally. For people with an intellectual disability a visit to the dentist can entail a lot of tension. For instance, because they don't exactly know what is going to happen or had a previous experience that has been unpleasant. By supporting the client in a way that fits their needs, the visit can run in a more relaxed way. This manual describes how you can adjust your support to the communication level and experience organisation of the client. Choosing a form of communication (object, photo, pictogram) needs to be adjusted to the individual possibilities of the client.

Besides the use of forms of communication, there are other aspects connected to the clients feeling of security during treatment. For instance the rate of the treatment, whether or not a parent or supervisor is present, who is in charge during treatment, what is calming for the client, etc. Before treatment these aspects can be taken into consideration, discussed and noted on preparation cards (see appendix 1, 2 and 3).

The photos depicting the steps of different dentist treatments can be supportive for some clients. The manual describes how the photos can be used on different communication levels and for different purposes (to prepare a client, to use during or after a dentist treatment).

After reading this manual you know:

- What it means to visit a dentist for clients that function on different communication levels;
- Which form of support belongs to which communication level;
- How you can use the photos depicting the steps of a visit to the dentist.

Points of attention

Make sure you communicate on a level that the client can handle well, even when stressed (for instance, have a look at the relapse prevention plan). This (sometimes) means that you communicate on a level just below the 'ordinary' communication level, to prevent putting too much pressure on the client. It can also be important to adjust the amount of information and the point in

time on which you prepare the client to the visit to the dentist. For instance, you can do this on the day of the visit, whereas the client can ordinarily oversee a longer period of time.

When preparing, take into consideration the guide lines after the visit to the dentist. For instance, when a client is not allowed to eat anything, prepare a separate visualization.

Questions that can help to prepare the visit to the dentist well:

- On which moment does the client needs support most? Before, during or after the visit to the dentist?
- Is a communication profile or relapse prevention plan of the client present? On which communication level does the client communicate with people around him or her? Using which means of communication? On which communication level does the client understand people around him or her? Which means of communication do these people use to communicate with the client?
- How much time can the client oversee? How does the client respond when exciting or new events are being planned? How does the client organise his or her experiences?
- Which forms of communication (photos, pictograms, signs, speech) are being used to communicate with the person and which means of communication can be used for this specific purpose?
- Which guide lines need to be followed (from the treatment of the dentist)? Such as not eating before or after the visit to the dentist?
- If necessary, ask less of the client before, during and after the visit to the dentist; expect less in self-reliance, for instance, help putting the jacket on and taking it off, give the person tasks or activities that they enjoy and can handle well even under stressful circumstances (so no skills are needed that they are still acquiring).
- Prepare how long in advance you are going to tell the client he or she is going to the dentist. Don't do this too long in advance.
- For what, by whom and in what way can a compliment and/or reward be given to the client?
- When treatment is clearly finished for the client, it is recommended to perform the next activity immediately. Tip: if something needs to be discussed or a new appointment needs to be made, do this by phone or email, so that the client doesn't need to wait.
- If the client stays anxious after the visit(s) to the dentist, even after a proper preparation, discuss with the dentist and a behaviour specialist whether diagnostics and treatment/support regarding the fear is a possibility.

1. Explanation and elaboration on different communication levels

Situationlevel 1

A client who communicates on situationlevel apprehends what happens here and now. He or she sees, feels, hears, smells and tastes what is present in the present moment. Physical incentives give information. He or she understands what is happening only after a situation has already started completely, when all elements are present. A client on this level communicates on basic needs and on things that are bound to themselves and aimed at satisfying their basic needs instantly. He or she is not aware that he or she is doing so. The client communicates through his or her own body, for example through body language, looking, making sounds, crying, smiling and moving around in space.

Situationlevel 2

Slowly a client can recognise certain situations, because they are repeated often. He or she then understands what is going to happen, even though the situation has not completely started yet. He or she understands an object that belongs to a certain situation within that situation, while it not yet touches their body. The client can communicate actively through a signal that belongs to a situation, but on which there are no fixed agreements. For instance one time through an object, but another time through making a sound or sitting down on a certain spot.

Preparing for a visit to the dentist

- The client will not understand in advance what is going to happen, they live within the here and now. Because of this the client can not or hardly be prepared for the visit to the dentist. Only communicate within the here and now; let the client know that you are leaving by putting on a jacket. At the moment that you see the car, you point to it, to let the client know that you are leaving by car. Support of a wellknown and trusted person is advised. The client will follow instructions better and experience less stress.

During the visit to the dentist

- The client completely depends on incentives that are bound to their body. During the treatment you can prepare the client within the situation through showing the object combined with an incentive that is bound to their body. This means the dentist, oral hygienist or supervisor shows the object to the client and let them feel, smell this before it is being used in the clients' mouth. The use of the object can first be shown on the person treating the client or the supervisor. After this, the client can experience the object (put on the little light, feel the vibration of the machine, etc.). After this the object is use for treatment. Stay close to the client, by maintaining contact and reassuring the client in a way that suits them best, for instance by talking in a friendly tone or singing. The supervisor can offer safety and sometimes physical guidance through applying pressure on the upper body of the client (making sure the client stays laying down and/or holding the clients hand).
- The wellknown rooms, places, proceedings, activities that belong to trusted situations are missing. A wellknown and trusted supervisor or a trusted and safe object (like a stuffed animal or other object) can help the client to feel safe.
- If the client can communicate through photos on situationlevel in daily life, you can use a maximum of two photos of the visualised steps to visualise the situation. Offer the photos

within the situation or just before a part of the treatment starts, so that the client can see that something is going to happen, and perhaps recognise something of what is going to happen. For instance a picture of the dentist building to show that you will be going in there. A picture of the dentist chair, to show the client can sit there. And a last picture such as the final part of the treatment (for instance rinsing).

- Make sure there is a clear and short closure within the here and now, for instance by signing FINISHED and walking out of the room together, or showing a picture of the dentist chair with a cross in front.
- If the client doesn't want to lay down, discuss whether treatment can be done sitting up or standing.
- Consider and discuss which treatment is needed and discuss what the options are if the client finds the situation to scary and refuses to cooperate. One option can be that the client is given medication to calm him or her down or even undergoes general anaesthetics. Naturally this is done in consultation with parents or caregivers and a physician.

After the visit to the dentist

- The client can be stressed because of the visit to the dentist. After the visit it is recommended to offer a well known and relaxing activity to the client.
- Communicating about the visit to the dentist after the actual situation doesn't reflect the situation level and will not be understood by the client.
- If the client (on situationlevel 2) uses a form of communication (makes or imitates the sign DENTIST or says the word 'dentist' after the visit has finished) it is important to stick to the here and now: "dentist is finished, now we are ...". Name the activity the client is doing now and clear things like pictures that are connected to the visit to the dentist.

Signallevel 1

A client who communicates on signallevel can link things together. He or she knows that for example an object, sound or picture can say something about an activity or event that occurs daily. The client knows small sequences of fixed orders. For example: brushing teeth always follows mealtime and thereafter he or she may go play. The client knows fixed signals that refer to a fixed situation. Also, he or she can him- or herself communicate through these signals, even if the situation is not yet visible. However, he or she can not generalize the meaning of the signal so doesn't know the content of the signal, just the referral function in a 1:1 connection. The signal can be for example a photo, sign, object, sound or pictogram. The total number of signals that the client can understand and actively use is limited.

Preparing for a visit to the dentist

- The meaning that a client attaches to the concept 'dentist' depends on previous experiences (which treatment has the client experienced before, how did this treatment go, how did the client respond to the treatment). The supervisor can anticipate on the expectations and memories of the client.
- How much time a client can oversee, determines how far in advance you can announce an activity (just before the activity, half a day or a day before). If the client has no positive experiences connected to the visit to the dentist, the announcement can bring forth tension. It is then recommended to announce the visit to the dentist on shorter notice. If the client has a visual dayplanner, you can plan the visit to the dentist for example half a day in advance at latest.
- If there is something new connected to the visit to the dentist (like a different dentist, different room, different treatment), the concept is new to the client. The client again needs to gain experience with it. The means of communication that have been used before, must gain new content. At first offer these means to the client within the situation, so the client can make the connection to the new meaning.
- Visual steps of the treatment can be put in a folder beforehand, without the client being present.

During the visit to the dentist

- Show the client the means of communication that announces that he or she is going to the dentist. This may be a pictogram, sign or a photo of the dentist, treatment room or building. This form of communication will generally be offered on short notice; just before the client leaves his or her home or school and goes to the dentist. Or you can visually plan the visit after a certain activity, depending on the estimation of the people around the client whether the client may want to do this other activity or the client will be stressed and not be able or willing to do anything else because of this announcement.
- In each treatment you maintain a fixed way of communication. For example: first show the means of communication (for example the photo) and then the accompanying sign. Then show the objects that the dentist uses. Then perform the treatment. This way the client will get time to grasp what is going to happen and tension and resistance can reduce.
- Always take the same series of photos that belong to the same treatment.

- Always start a treatment in the same order, for example: go sit on the chair, put on the napkin, show the chair can go down, put the chair down. End by rinsing, making a new appointment, and shake hands with the dentist or wave. It is important to visualise the visit to the dentist has ended. This can be done by pasting a red cross over the photo of the dentist or dentist chair. Then announce what is coming next; for example a car or bus ride home.
- A visit to the dentist usually is exciting. Offering safety to calm the client down can best be done by someone that knows the client well and whom the client trusts. This person can also estimate best whether the client still understands all means of communication or communication needs to be adjusted.

After the visit to the dentist

- After the visit clearly show the treatment is over and continue with the ordinary daily routine of the client.
- If the client is still a little tense, you can adjust the program and offer relaxing activities. Keep the client within the here and now: "dentist is finished, now...". Name which activity the client is doing at this moment.
- If the pictures of the dentist are still visible to the client (for example with a red cross over them), observe whether this leads to extra tension. If so, clean them away.
- The visual preparation of the visit to the dentist can be pasted in the life book or experience book of the client.

Signaallevel 2

The client has more understanding of its surroundings and has acquired longer sequences of fixed daily orders. If something in this sequence changes he or she can adjust him- or herself, if the situation is known and trusted. The client understands a signal can refer to several equal situations and can generalise somewhat. The client will become more selfdependent and can for example use a communication booklet to actively communicate. Slowly a client at this level can learn to make several associations connected to one same signal. However, this can only be done for signals that are connected to situations that occur daily. On signallevel 2 there is a great difference visible between clients that can primarily associate well and have learned through training to connect signals to several meanings on one hand, and clients that can themselves discover coherency and have for example an overview of the week.

Preparing for a visit to the dentist

- Depending on the sense of time, you can prepare the client for the visit to the dentist a day before, or longer in advance. For example through planning it in the picto agenda, on a visual week schedule or a visual schedule with beds depicting how many nights till the visit is planned. However, there will also be clients that can't be prepared until on the day the visit is planned.
- Tell the client what he or she will be doing after the visit, for example that they will go back to school. He or she then knows that he or she will eventually return to a familiar sequence.
- You can discuss the content of the visit to the dentist in general terms, by showing photos of what is going to happen. It is desirable to do this not too long in advance. A maximum of a day in advance, or even an hour before the actual visit. You can for instance make a photo booklet

together with the client (by sticking photos in a folder of the treatments that are going to happen). On the day the visit is planned, you can take this booklet to the dentist. Or you can make a paper that sums up what is going to happen when. The client can keep this or can keep it at a fixed place. This way the client gets the opportunity to look at the photos at a moment he or she needs to.

- Connect with previous experiences of the client. If there is anything new connected to the visit to the dentist (different dentist, room, treatment) this is a new concept for the client. He or she must gain new experience again. The means of communication that have already been used have to get new content. Visual that which is new (who, what, where, when, how) for the client.

During the visit to the dentist

- If the client understands photos, you can show them previous to a certain (part of the) treatment. In a few steps will be consequently shown what is going to happen. The client can look at the photos and ask questions about them. In stead of photos you can also offer pictograms, PCS pictures or another form of visual material.
- If the client has been to the dentist before and there is something new connected to his visit (different dentist or treatment), point this out by visualising it while discussing the steps.
- Things that have been pointed out under signallevel 1 are also important to these clients, such as maintaining a fixed order in communication and clearly point out the start and finish of the visit.

After the visit to the dentist

- Show the client in a way that suits him or her that the visit is ended (cross in the agenda, cross over the communication board, signing FINISHED).
- In an experience map you can visualise the visit to the dentist together with the client. You can for example take photos from the visualised steps and let the client choose which of these he or she wants to paste in his or her experience map. Depending on the capabilities of the client (such as social-emotional level) you can visualise emotions the client has experienced (for example through emotion pictograms). You can go through the paper that you made together with the client and together look back (for a shorter or longer period of time) on the visit to the dentist. Consequently you can close the conversation and look together to what the client is going to do next and help him or her on its way in his or her ordinary daily routine.

Symbollevel 1

A client, who can communicate on symbollevel, can communicate about matters within as well as outside the here and now. He or she can piece together different situations, persons and events and can generalise notions. He or she can communicate about matters in the past, present and future. He or she can remember things without context and surroundings being obviously present and communicate about them. He or she can look at the meaning of a means of communication, separate this from the context and attach variable meanings, depending the situation and moment. He or she can attach variable meanings to sequences of events and learn new sequences by themselves. He or she must have gained experience in all these situations before they can communicate about them. Communicating on symbollevel can be done through different forms of communication, such as photos, signs, objects, pictograms. It is not about what kind of means it is, but how the client uses it and which he or she prefers.

Preparing for a visit to the dentist

- Depending the sense of time and communicationlevel of the client, he or she can be prepared on the visit to the dentist a day or longer in advance. For instance by planning the visit in a picto agenda, on a week schedule or through a schedule with little beds depicting how many nights till the visit. The dentist appointment can for instance be written in the agenda of the client. However, there will also be clients that can't be prepared until on the day the visit is planned.
- A few days before the visit to the dentist you can start the preparation on the treatment that is planned (who, what, where, when, what time, how). For instance, you can discuss with the client what time and where the appointment is and who will accompany the client to the dentist. Also you can show photos of the treatment. Look together in the agenda to find out which activities are planned and then tell together with supervisors and client at his or her job or school that he or she will go to the dentist and when he or she will be picked up or has to leave.
- Look together at which experiences the client has gained before and discuss and visualise changes.
- Discuss which experiences during a previous visit were easy or less fun. What can be helpful or supportive?
- The supervisor can also explain to the client why a certain treatment is necessary and what the consequences would be if the treatment will not be done. This way, the client will better understand the necessity of the treatment and you can talk about any inconveniences.

During the visit to the dentist

- Before the treatment starts, you make clear what is going to happen. The client will (on his or her level) be given the opportunity to ask questions. You can communicate with the client with use of visual means of communication about the situation. Photos can be supportive in for example explaining the successive steps (giving information) and giving the client the opportunity to clarify specific questions (asking for information).

After the visit to the dentist

- After returning from the dentist you discuss with the client how he or she has experienced the visit. Eventually you can include this in an experiencebook.
- You can write or paste the next appointment in the agenda for closure.
- If possible, you can let the client choose what he or she wants to do. Mind an eventual relapse in abilities if the visit to the dentist has brought a lot of tension. Sometimes extra support or relieve in tasks is necessary, even though the client is more selfdependant ordinarily.
- Depending the tension the visit has brought, see whether you can put the next dentist appointment in the agenda right after the visit, or you can better do this later. Eventually you can reschedule other appointments planned at that day together with the client. Together wit supervisors and client you can tell at work or school the client goes to the dentist and what time he or she will be picked up or has to leave.

Symbollevel 2

A client at this level can easily learn new notions and symbols. He or she can variate between sequences quickly. He or she can communicate on something that he or she has not consciously experienced themselves. Symbols can have meaning outside the clients' environment. New information can easily be integrated in existing information.

Preparing for a visit to the dentist

- If the client asks about the next visit to the dentist, the supervisor can tell what is going to happen. You can alert the client at least a week in advance on the visit to the dentist.
- Photos may be supportive in explaining what is going to happen.
- Together with the client you can make a preparation and always ask the client which means he or she wants to use for this. For example by looking at the visualised steps of the dentist treatment.
- A day before you can sit together to explain what is going to happen and why. Eventually you can explain the consequences if the visit to the dentist wouldn't take place.

During the visit to the dentist

- Ask the dentist to explain as much as they can on what he or she is going to do.
- Eventually you can bring the photos if the client doesn't understand the meaning.

After the visit to the dentist

- Ask whether the client wants to talk about the visit to the dentist or not. Eventually the cliënt can write or make an experience page by using photos by themselves.
- The next appointment is written in the agenda (by the client or supervisor).
- The points named under symbollevel 1 can be important for these clients also, such as a relapse in abilities and having to deal with the experience in their own way.

Only suggestions!

The given examples are only suggestions! You always have to take into account the request for help and the situation of the individual client. That's why it is important to consider which themes are important to the client. Consequently you can develop a plan of action in consultation with the behavioural specialist. If you have any questions you can always consult a communication



specialist. There are a couple of means of communication available that help to communicate about a visit to the dentist.

Appendix 1 – Explanation on preparation card

Explanation on preparation card

- The cards below are tools. With these you can map a brief overview of the desirable guidance and communication the client needs during a visit to the dentist. This is aimed specifically at the possibilities of the individual client.
- Card A is a tool for the dentist, dentist assistant and oral hygienist. The aim is that they are broadly aware of the desirable guidance and communication the client needs prior to their visit to the dentist.
- Card B is a tool for the supervisor. With this, the supervisor can prepare for and accompany the client during the visit to the dentist.

Course of action

- The personal supervisor prepares the visit in collaboration with the behavioural specialist and/or communication specialist.
- The cards are used together with the 'manual visit to the dentist'.
- Before the information is shared with the dentist, assistant or oral hygienist, it is ready by the treatment coordinator for agreement.

Appendix 2 – Card A

Information for dentist/assistant/oral hygienist

Name client:

Institution:

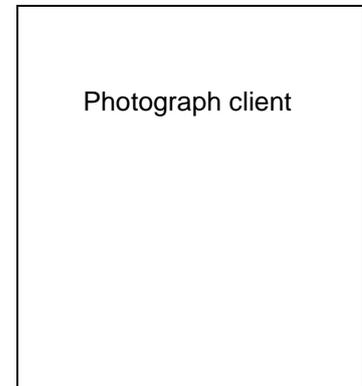
Group:

Limitations:

Hearing / hearing impaired / deaf

Seeing / visually impaired / blind

Other



Communication level of the client

- When the client is relaxed:

- When the client is tense:

These forms of communication are used by the client and people in their surroundings

(Like spoken language, sign language, speech supported by signs, objects, photos, pictograms and others)

- Client:

- People in their surroundings:

Details

(Like: is the client afraid of examinations, injections, pain? How does the client respond to tension? For instance: does the client express anger through behaviour?)

Appendix 3 – Card B

Tool for supervisors for preparation for and accompanying the client during the visit to the dentist

Name:

Institution:

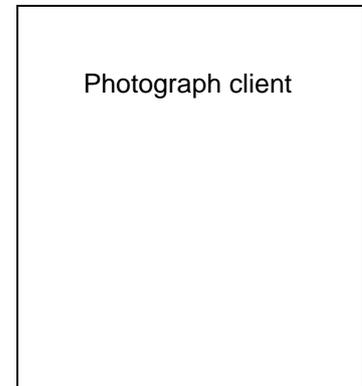
Group:

Limitations:

Hearing / hearing impaired / deaf

Seeing / visually impaired / blind

Other



Communication level of the client

- When client is relaxed:

- When client is tense:

Which forms of communication are used by the client and the people in their surroundings?

(Like objects, photos, pictograms, others, namely...)

- Client:

- People in their surroundings:

Content

- Client: Which specific objects, pictures, signs are being used by the client to communicate about a visit to the dentist? What content does a notion such as dentist, visit to the dentist, narcosis, etc. entail to the client?

- Surroundings: Which objects, pictures, signs, etc. do they use?

Use

- In what way are the means being used?
(Like taking separate visualisations, planning on a communication board, showing objects/pictures within the situation, let the client feel, smell, taste, how many photos can be used maximally in a visualisation visualising steps, offering the form step by step, etc.)
- When are the means being used? When do you communicate about something?
(Within the here and now, half a day, a day in advance, a week in advance, can the client look forward to and back on an event; can the client get back to an event?)
- What is supportive or helpful in the support of the client?
(like fitting previous experiences, offering safety, etc.)
- Why? (Why is chosen for is this? What are previous experiences: how did the client respond to previous visits, how was the previous visit visualised? When was the visit prepared?)

Details

(Like is the client afraid of examinations, injections, pain? How does the client respond to tension; for example does the client express anger through behaviour? At what time does the client need most support; before, during or after the visit to the dentist)