

THE SPECIAL NEEDS DENTIST

DR. JACOB DENT HAS DEVOTED HIS CAREER TO SERVING SPECIAL NEEDS PERSONS WITH NON-SEDATIVE, PATIENT-CENTERED CARE

BY DIANA VALLETTE



According to the Journal of the American Dental Association, about 73 percent of people have some level of dental anxiety or fear. It takes time to work through that anxiety, and Dr. Jacob Dent is just the guy for the job.

“In 2006, my son Ethan was diagnosed with Autism. It sent us spiraling into a new phase of life where the focus was solely on helping him,” he says.

Dent started to learn about the different therapies available to children on the spectrum — ABA, OT, PT, speech. He took that information and implemented it into his practice.

“So many people struggle with home care for their loved ones with special needs. Honestly, prior to my son’s diagnosis, I had zero training with special needs patients.”

Dent decided he’d create the space kids like his son needed. He’d practice outside the proverbial box and focus his efforts on sensory integration and desensitization instead of using more common sedation methods.

EARLY CAREER

He started his career as an associate dentist in DeRidder and Leesville in 2003.

A year later, he opened his own practice in Creole, where he worked for a year and a half until Hurricane Rita destroyed his office and left him without a place to practice.

Dent made the move to Texas, where he practiced for 14 years. “In 2015, I had the opportunity to partner in my first Louisiana office in Baton Rouge. Since then, we’ve grown to 13 locations across the state — including Lake Charles.”

In 2019, Dent was diagnosed with stage three lymphoma and stopped practicing for six months. While in remission and during COVID, Dent and his family decided it was time to come back home to Louisiana permanently.

DON’T BLAME DENTISTS

Today, Dent does a little bit of everything. He spends three days per week in his Lake Charles and Lafayette offices while also working as a subject matter expert. “I’m blessed to be able to travel across the country to give lectures to dental providers and caregivers.”

He also owns a business. Dental Desensitization Systems (DDS) is a take-home dental desensitization kit he and his business partner created to serve the community he cares for. It’s a tool caregivers

can use before and after dental visits to help make visits a bit easier. “The idea is that the patient will have already been exposed to the tools and materials that’ll be used in visits,” he says.

The kits also help to improve at-home oral hygiene by reducing some of the challenges. “We actually just launched an online training certification course for caregivers who want to learn more,” he says. “Sometimes, for these patients, something as simple as teeth brushing at home is one of the most challenging parts of the day. It’s a loaded sensory experience, and when parents get to the end of their day, they’re tired. Everyone can relate to being ready to get your kid off to bed. It can be easy to want to avoid the meltdown.”

“My advice to these families is simple: keep trying. And don’t be afraid to change the routine to fit your life and the needs of your family.”

He says it’s not uncommon to have practices turn special needs patients away on the phone before even being seen. “Many caregivers struggle to find dentists



DENTAL INSIGHTS

who are willing to see their loved ones. I don't blame the dentists. Many of them aren't confident or don't have the skillset to overcome the challenges that come with neurodivergent or neurosensitive patients."

Dent says parents can be successful when they're consistent and collaborative. If all care providers are on the same page and everyone is working together, difficult behaviors and sensory aversions can slowly go away.

SPECIAL FAMILIES

"The families we serve are so appreciative and usually walk away amazed at how my staff and I treat their loved ones. We make sure everyone is treated with patience and grace. They are not a burden on the schedule. We're genuinely glad they're here."

Dent makes sure to spend time not just on the patients' oral health but on calming any parental anxiety as well.

Fifty percent of his patients have some sort of disability, while the other 50 percent suffer from either a sensory sensitivity or dental anxiety.

"Our Monday mornings are sensory friendly hours. Those visits are in high demand," he says. Monday mornings are booked six months out.

HOW IT WORKS

At Dent's practice, patients will be sent a dental sensory profile questionnaire after scheduling their appointment. "This is the most important part of the first visit because without it I'm going in blind and can't give the patient the best experience possible." Each family is given a one-hour exclusive appointment with Dent for their first appointment.

It's typical during the appointments to have to work through what Dent refers to as "the ninja" or "the clam." Some patients won't sit still in the dental chair or have aggressive or self-injuring behaviors. It's important to note that on top of the other struggles, poor diet (which is common among picky eaters) can lead to a higher cavity risk.

He doesn't sedate patients. Instead, he seeks to work through problems with desensitization techniques. He refers patients who need extensive care requiring sedation in a hospital setting to other providers.

ADAPTIVE CARE

"I've done my fair share of parking lot cleanings for patients who refuse to get out of the car," he says.

Dent has patients that drive to him weekly from Houston or fly from different states. Readers might wonder why anyone would go all that way just for a dental cleaning, but the truth is when the options are limited, families will do what they need to do to be seen in a non-sedation, judgment free zone.

One of Dent's patients, Briley, has Down Syndrome. She and her mom drove over an hour to see him, and when they arrived, Briley refused to leave the waiting room. It took Dent about an hour to earn the trust needed just to get a toothbrush into her mouth.

"Over the course of a couple years, Briley's gotten more comfortable. Now she comes to the sensory room on her own and lays down on the ground. She allows me to clean her teeth with no fuss now. Yes, she and I are sitting on the ground together, which isn't ideal, but for Briley and her family? It's huge progress." Briley's story was featured in a documentary called Sensory Overload. Readers can find the trailer on YouTube.

AN ENCOURAGING WORD

Dent says he wishes Louisiana, spe-

cifically Lake Charles, had an organized parent training program for basic care that included things like dentist appointments, doctor visits and haircuts.

Dr. Jacob Dent is a husband, a father to two and the owner of a Harry Potter themed Airbnb. He's also a special needs dentist who often works with patients diagnosed with Autism, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy, Dementia, sensory processing disorder and anxiety.

"What I try to do, more than anything else, is encourage, inspire and affirm parents," he says. "I want parents to know that

I understand it's hard, and I know it seems like an impossible task some days. I get it and I'm here for you."

Dent does what he does because he wants to educate as many people as possible. "I want other dentists to feel confident treating this population so we can move the needle in a positive direction. That's the legacy I want to leave behind. Not the teeth that I fixed...but the people I helped."

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