

transitioning from pediatric to adult dental care: why, when and how?

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1) Why should I think about transitioning my child from pediatric to adult dental care?

It is likely that through most of childhood and adolescence, your child has been under the care of a pediatric dentist or a general dentist who focuses on care for children. As your child approaches adulthood, their dental and oral health needs are better served by a dentist who has expertise in the recognition and management of oral health needs of adults. Planning for the transition of your child's oral health to an adult-centered dental home will maximize uninterrupted patient-centered, high-quality oral and dental care in adulthood.

2. At what age do I need to start planning for a transition?

Transition to an adult dental care setting should happen by the time your child reaches the age of majority. However, transition is not a single event; rather it is a sequence of planned and coordinated steps. Planning for the transition of care may start during the mid-teen years (15-16 years). Although all children eventually transition from their pediatric dental homes to an adult-centered dental practice, this transition can be challenging for children with craniofacial differences. As you start planning on transition of care, include your child in discussions and information sharing so that your child is aware of their own dental history and their future needs.

3. What resources exist for parents planning their child's transition?

The best resource to plan for transition of oral and dental health is your child's current dentist. Since he/ she is familiar with the extent of your child's needs, they may be able to refer your child to a colleague who would best match your child's needs.

Some professional organizations can also help you find enlisted oral health providers. These organizations include the American Dental

Association (www.ada.org), Special Care Dentistry Association (www.scdaonline.org) and the state dental association. You may also inquire at the dental school if there is one in your area. If your child has dental insurance, you may check with the insurance carrier for a list of providers.

Your child may be seeing dental specialists such as an oral surgeon and/ or an orthodontist. It is important to have the discussion on transition with all oral health specialists involved in your child's care. Most oral surgeons and orthodontists are usually able to provide continuity of care into adulthood but it is important to have this discussion with them and establish explicit communication to confirm it.

4. Is the process different from medical transition?

The process is similar to medical transition, but there are some differences to keep in mind. The search to identify the right oral health care provider may take longer and it may be difficult to find a provider close-by. You will also need to take into consideration the limitations which may be imposed by the dental insurance carrier for your child's continued dental coverage after they turn 18 years old, or in some states, after they turn 21 years old.

5. How should parents prepare financially for continuity of care?

It is important to discuss with all your child's oral health providers and specialists about the anticipated future treatment needs and how they will be covered by dental insurance. It is also important to inquire about the estimated cost of routine preventive care. These discussions will help you determine if you need to plan for additional out-of-pocket expenses. You may consider contributions to pretax health savings account to maximize your employment benefits.

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6. If a patient has been many years without a special craniofacial dentist or orthodontist, where does she start to find someone qualified as an adult?

The following professional groups can help you find a craniofacial team close to you so that you can get started (it is never too late to start!)

Children's Craniofacial Association:
www.ccakids.org

National Craniofacial Association:
www.faces-cranio.org

American Cleft Palate Craniofacial Association:
www.acpa-cpf.org

7. How does an adult patient "fill in" a new provider on their previous work and how do you recommend parents help prepare for that time (without bringing along mom's plastic "medical records bin")?

Fortunately, now many dental practices utilize electronic health records and transfer of patient records between providers can be accomplished safely and efficiently. Once you have identified the practice to which your child will be transitioning, you will need to fill out an authorization for release of health information at the "pediatric" provider's office. You can request for your child's records to be provided to you or for them to be forwarded to the next selected provider. Historical dental records can be voluminous! You can also request a case summary from your child's provider to make things easier.

8. What does the future of transitional dentistry look like?

The dental profession is striving to provide a dental home across the lifespan of a patient. Patient advocates are championing better coverage for oral health services by dental insurance carriers. Dental educational institutions are incorporating competency in providing care for differently abled individuals across all ages and stages of life. Dentists are utilizing contemporary technology such as telehealth into their practice. This enables dentists to receive consults from experts to provide evidence-based care for their patients.

9. What's the most important tip you can give to parents to prepare AND the most important things for adults who weren't prepared?

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Limiting sweetened foods and beverages, brushing twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing every night is the best way to prevent getting cavities or gum disease. Regular preventive oral health visits are important to screen and diagnose problems early. It is never too late to start practicing these good oral care habits. If you face challenges in finding a provider to transition to, ask the members of the cranio-facial team for help.