

Access to dental care in Alabama for children with special needs

Parents' perspectives

DANIA E. AL ACILI, D.D.S., M.P.H., M.S.; JEFFREY ROSEMAN, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H.; MARY ANN PASS, M.D., M.P.H.; JOHN B. THORNTON, D.M.D., M.A.; L. SCOTT CHAVERS, M.P.H., Ph.D.

ABSTRACT:-

Background. Access to dental care and delivery of quality dental health services are important for children with special needs. The authors surveyed parents of children with special needs in Alabama to determine their perceptions of access and barriers to dental care for their children.

Methods. The authors sent a questionnaire to 2,057 parents of children aged 3 to 13 years with special needs—cleft lip and/or palate; cerebral palsy, or CP; spina bifida; or epilepsy/seizure disorders—who were listed in a database provided by Children Rehabilitation Services of Alabama. The authors conducted univariate and multivariate analyses to calculate odds ratios and 95 percent confidence intervals.

Results. The overall response rate was 38 percent (N = 714). Eighty-five percent of respondents reported that their children had received some form of routine dental care. However, 35 percent of respondents reported they had had problems finding dentists willing to treat their children. Among those with problems, significant barriers to dental care included their children's having Medicaid insurance, poor oral health or CP, as well as a shortage of dentists with training in the care of children with special needs.

Conclusions and Practice Implications. While the majority of respondents said their children had access to dental care, one-third said their children had problems receiving this care. Many of these problems can be ameliorated.

Increasing providers' participation in the Medicaid program and improving their knowledge about, empathy for and training in the care of children with special needs is essential in improving access to dental care for this population.