

## **Caring for Patients Living with Autism in the Perioperative Setting**

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**Introduction:** Prevalence data suggests that Autism Spectrum Disorder affects 1 in 36 children in the United States. Children living with autism often have behavioral challenges, as well as issues related to sensory processing and social communication. Due to co-morbidities involving the ear-nose-throat and gastrointestinal systems, as well as the need for general anesthesia for oral health maintenance, children living with autism have a greater likelihood of needing procedural care. The nature of the perioperative environment is often bright, loud, and fast-paced, includes many different care givers, and is generally disruptive to the patient's normal routines.

**Identification of the problem:** There is a recognized need and desire to improve the care of perioperative patients living with autism.

**EBP Question/Purpose:** In children living with autism, does the presence of an individualized coping plan impact patient care and family satisfaction in the perioperative setting?

**Methods/Evidence:** Databases searched included CINAHL, OVID, Google Scholar, the Cochrane Library, Clinical Key, Pub Med and the National Guideline Clearinghouse from 2011-2021. Search terms included the following: autism spectrum disorder, children, coping plan, perioperative management, anesthesia management, behavioral coping plan, behavioral challenges, and perioperative. The search of the literature yielded thirty-six articles. Thirteen articles met inclusion criteria, were reviewed and included as evidence. Twelve were evaluated as Level C evidence and one as Level E evidence.

The evidence supports an individualized coping plan for children with autism and their families. Proactively creating a coping plan for a child with autism who needs perioperative care is generally considered a best practice. Early identification and comprehensive assessment, environmental modifications, and equipping staff with the knowledge and tools necessary will help create more successful visits.

**Significance of Findings/Outcomes:** We have implemented a system to create individualized coping plans for children living with autism which are accessible to all care givers. Over one year, a perioperative coping plan has been in place for an average of sixty-five percent of patients. Staff, provider and family verbal feedback has been positive. Satisfaction survey results for dental patients have improved, with a Net Promoter Score increase of 7.5% and an 11.5% increase in parents feeling that they were involved in the visit. This work has spread to the outpatient surgery center, inpatient units, outpatient clinics and the Imaging department as well.

**Implications for perianesthesia nurses and future research:** Along with considering environmental modifications, having a coping plan in place helps the health care team to provide care individualized to the patient, offering a smoother perioperative experience for all.