

Survey of Alabama Dentists: Practices and Perspectives on Special Needs

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Introduction

- This study examines the current landscape of dental care for individuals with physical, developmental, sensory, or cognitive disabilities in Alabama.
- Data from this study will inform future statewide efforts to improve dental care access and accessibility for individuals with disabilities and their caregivers.

Methodology

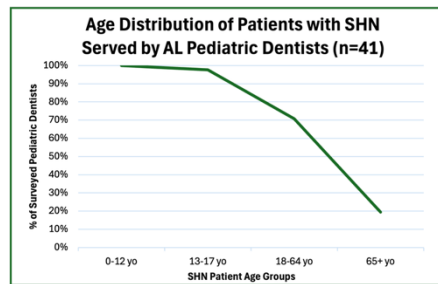
- A 31-question cross-sectional survey was distributed electronically through the Alabama Dental Association's E-Newsletter and the Alabama Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's email list and GroupMe.
- Data was collected via Qualtrics between November 11, 2025, and January 19, 2026.
- Eligibility respondents: hold an active Alabama dental license and currently provide dental care in the state.
- The questionnaire assessed practice characteristics, care provision for patients with SHN, and provider demographics.

Limitation

- Sampling bias:** Non-probability sampling through professional networks and limited participation from general dentists restrict broader generalizability.
- Representativeness:** Findings largely relied on the 46 pediatric dentists (~43% statewide pediatric workforce), therefore, may not fully reflect experiences across all pediatric practice settings.
- Response limitations:** Self-reported responses may be subject to recall bias or social desirability.

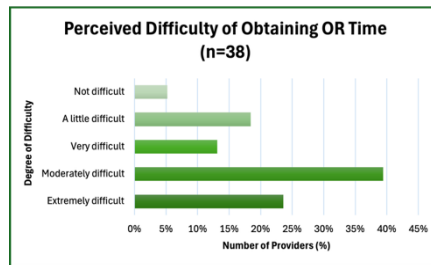
Results

- Sample: 58 respondents; 46 (83%) pediatric dentists. Gender balanced (53% female, 48% male)
- Language: 53% English-only patient communication; 38% English + Spanish
- 73% of responding pediatric dentists treat over 100 patients with disabilities in the past 12 months.
- Nearly half (48%) of these pediatric practices report being "nearly full" with limited room for new patients.



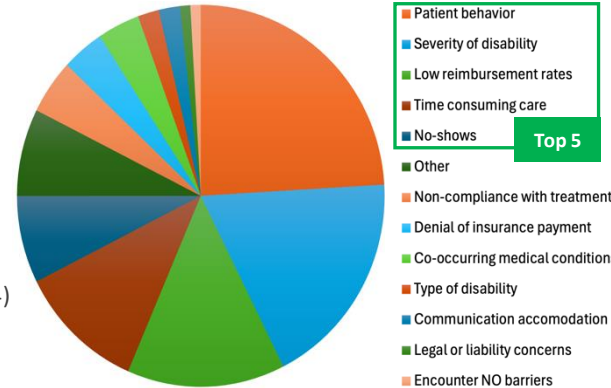
Pediatric Providers Shouldering Adult Care:

71% of respondents report treating adult patients (18-64)
20% treat geriatric patients (65+)

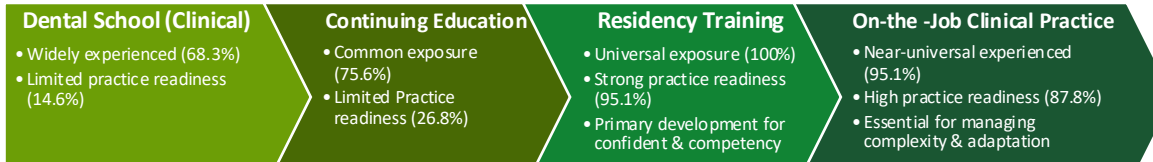


Critical system-level barrier: the OR Bottleneck
67% find securing OR time moderately to extremely difficult.

Primary Barriers in Providing Dentle Care for Patients with SHCNs:

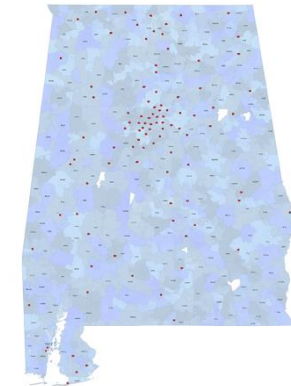


Top Impacts of Difficult OR Access on Patients	% of Cases
Delayed necessary treatment	83.3%
Led to worsening oral health conditions	83.3%
Patients traveled long distances	69.4%
Patient or caregiver distress	61.1%
Patients went without care altogether	41.7%



Training Pipeline: Exposure vs. Practice Readiness for Caring for Patients with SHCNs

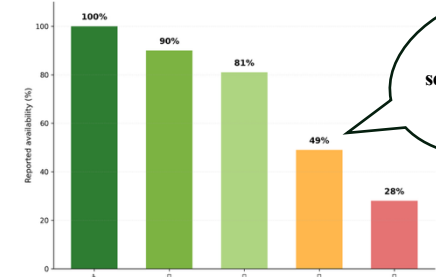
Results on Current Access to Care in AL



State-level Accessibility:
Practice Locations Across Alabama
Made with map from UnitedStatesZipCodes.org

Urban Clusters with Statewide Distribution:
Although many practices providing care located in metropolitan areas, practices are also broadly distributed across the state.

Practice-level Accessibility & Accommodations



“Sign language translation services are VERY expensive.”
- Anonymous responder

Physical accessibility is widely available, but communication-related accommodations lag.

Conclusion

Access to dental care for patients with SHCNs in Alabama heavily rely on pediatric dentists and is constrained by limited operating room availability, resulting in delayed and foregone care despite broad geographic distribution of the participating practices.

Implications

Our findings suggest opportunities to improve access through system-level supports, including expanded training pathways and increased hospital capacity for complex dental care.