"Despite the importance of proper oral care, dental care is often cited as an unmet health need for children with special needs. With the rise of children being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, it’s likely that interactions between dental health professions and autistic children will increase in the future. However, the majority of dentists are unwilling to work with this population because of perceived resistive behaviors” wrote Dr. Mallory Fox, a recent graduate of Western Michigan University’s Occupational Therapy Entry-Level Doctoral (WMU OTD) program.

This two fold problem of deficits in oral health for children with special needs perpetuated by apprehension in the dental field to work with this population is what Dr. Fox set out to address during her Capstone Experience and Project. Prior to executing her project, Fox completed an extensive literature review exploring the need for a comprehensive approach to dental visits for children with sensory processing differences. She also conducted a needs assessment at her capstone site, Growing Smiles Pediatric Dentistry in Grand Rapids, Michigan, using a SWOT analysis to better understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as it pertains to providing dental care to children with sensory processing differences and autism. Once adequate information was collected, Mallory developed objectives to achieve during her 14-week experience including creating handouts for parents, visuals for the children, and educating staff on sensory strategies.
“During her 14-week intensive program, Fox leveraged skills acquired through her WMU OTD program to provide a myriad of educational resources including the new “All Smiles Shine” app, environmental modifications, and training sessions to both staff and caregivers of autistic children and those with sensory processing differences. “Occupational therapists have specialized training in sensory and environmental adaptations. They can provide a unique opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration between occupational therapy and dentistry to decrease anxiety, reduce the use of general anesthesia and restraints, and improve overall oral health for autistic patients,” wrote Fox.

For Mallory, a recent certified and registered occupational therapist, the success of her pediatric dentistry program has reached far beyond Growing Smiles and even the state of Michigan. She was recently granted the opportunity to expand upon her initial capstone project at her new place of employment, Dragonfly Pediatric Speech Therapy, in Parker, Colorado and will be partnering and training dental professionals in the community. She is currently working on writing a grant with another OT to fund community outreach and to push sensory approaches into dentists and doctors offices in the area. Wrote Fox, “This capstone project absolutely terrified me but I’m so thankful… I never imagined it would continue to be something I pursued, but here I am!”

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT FOX’S PROJECT?
- Here is a News video by WZZM13 on Fox’s Project
- Here is Fox’s Capstone Dissemination Video

Outcomes collected via interview and conversation following Mallory’s capstone experience and project included:
- Improved confidence in dental providers to provide services to children with autism or sensory processing differences assessed
- Increased comfort during dental visits for children with autism or sensory processing differences
- Improved caregiver involvement during dental appointments.