

Dental Health & Hygiene

Meet Your Child Where They Are

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Oral health is a vital component of healthy daily living, but for some children with autism, oral habits can be a challenge. With patience, perseverance, and determination, many of these challenges can be overcome and the results will be rewarding with a positive impact on oral health. Dental literature has noted that children with autism may experience more dental problems due to sensitivities around the mouth, diet, difficulty with brushing, and difficulty accessing dental care. Furthermore, many are unable to verbalize complaints about any dental pain or problems they may be experiencing. It is for these reasons that establishing regular dental exams, both at home and in a dental office are essential to ensure overall good health, and avoid unnecessary dental emergencies.

Effective Oral Hygiene Routine

A parent first must assess a child's abilities and willingness to brush his/her teeth, floss, use a daily rinse, etc. If your child is reluctant and does not allow you to perform these basic oral hygiene routines, do not despair. Go slowly at first and use a technique called: Tell, Show, Do (or T-S-D). For instance, tell your child that you will be using a toothbrush and explain the purpose for using it in an age-appropriate manner. Then show your child the actual toothbrush and include a visual aid in the conversation, e.g. a picture book or a video showing a child brushing his/her teeth. This step is critical since it introduces the child to the object being discussed and provides "modeling". The final step is to slowly introduce the toothbrush into your child's mouth and gently brush the teeth in small circles to remove any food debris and plaque. Throughout the steps in the T-S-D process, provide frequent praise for acceptable behavior. The key to success in establishing a proper oral health routine is repetition, and more importantly, patience.

It is by establishing an effective oral hygiene routine that we may prevent dental caries (cavities). Baby teeth serve an important purpose in the development of your child. They are important for sleep, nutrition, speech, and self-esteem. In addition, dental decay has been associated with children missing days from school, failure to thrive, visits to the emergency room, and other non-desirable (yet avoidable) outcomes. It is important to remember that tooth decay is a completely preventable disease and one that you want to avoid with your child. Here are additional tips in establishing an effective oral hygiene routine with your family:

- Make toothbrushing a routine, and if you are using picture schedules, add a picture of toothbrushing as part of your morning and bedtime routine.

- If your child is sensitive to bright lights, noises, or smells remember to choose a place that is void of these triggers, and minimize distractions. Consistency works best so try to use the same location, timing, and positioning.



- For younger children, i.e. 2-6 year age range, use a pea-size amount of "kids" toothpaste. For children older than 6 years of age, a conventional toothpaste may be used. Try using toothpaste without flavoring or those containing baking soda since children transitioning to "adult" toothpaste may object to the "spiciness" of the new paste.

- Start slowly by introducing your child to the toothbrush, toothpaste, and floss. Gently place the brush on your child's teeth for a few seconds. If your child does not object, continue by brushing the teeth; start with either the top or bottom teeth, work your way around the arch and brush the backsides and chewing surfaces of the same teeth. When finished with top or bottom jaw, continue to the next and repeat. Remember to praise along the way! Once you have completed brushing your child's teeth, rinse their mouth with water. If he/she is not willing to rinse, you may wipe the toothpaste with a clean towel or gauze. If behavior permits, introduce the floss (flossers are a more practical variant of conventional floss). Introduce the flosser between the teeth that are in contact. Gently press the flosser until a "click" is heard to ensure that the contact area is properly cleaned. It is important to remove accumulated plaque and food debris between the teeth since many bacteria are harbored in these hard to reach areas and are a common location for cavities.

Remember, the trick is to start slow and incrementally add steps to your toothbrushing regimen. Do not try to introduce everything at once to your child since this may overwhelm him/her. For a texture sensitive child, let them acclimate first to the flavor and work in the texture of the toothpaste. Then move to the sensation of the toothbrush against the teeth, and eventually introduce the floss and/or any mouthrinse.

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