

Oral health is very important to healthy daily living. For some children with ASD, oral health habits can be challenging. Below are some tips and resources for parents and caregivers.

FINDING A DENTIST

- Searching for a dentist – call the office and discuss your child's needs
- Ask if they have experience working with children with ASD
- Do they have special procedures in place to optimize your visit
- Find a dentist in your area with this link

BRUSHING INDEPENDENTLY

- Consider working with an occupational therapist
- Make a game out of counting their teeth
- Help you child pick out of the toothbrush
- If a child is sensitive to touch – start by using the toothbrush to touch the child's lips, inside of mouth
- Teach the child to open wide so that this direction is understood.
- Show your child how you brush your teeth
- Use a timer, visual supports and schedules

EDUCATE AND PREPARE YOURSELF

- Consult with your child's classroom teacher or OT for suggestions
- Call ahead to see if the dentist is running on time
 - If they are delayed ask the receptionist if you could wait in the car and to call you when they are ready
- Bring a favorite toy or reward for a job well done
- Bring a family member, teacher or autism expert to help make the visit a success
- Tell your dentist what time of day works best for your child
- Share your child's coping strategies with the dental staff before the visit
- Describe any concerns or challenges before that may present themselves

PREPARE YOUR CHILD FOR THE DENTIST VISIT

- Create and read a social story
- Schedule a few short "happy" visits to start off with
- Allow your child to get used to the office environment, try out the chair, hear the drill noises, open their mouth, etc.
- Use these visits to slowly desensitize your child
- See if the dentist office has pictures of their office so you can review them before your visit
- Teach your child to:
 - Put their hands on their stomach
 - Put their feet straight out
 - Open wide
 - Holding their mouth open
 - Counting their teeth

- Cleaning with a power brush
- Taking X-rays
- Spitting in the sink
- Instruments are available at a drugstore: Small flashlight, dental mirror, rubber-tipped gum massager
- Ask your dentist if you can get some dental bite wings to practice with

AT THE OFFICE

- Let your child stretch a therapy band in their hands or ankles while in the chair
- Let your child wear sunglasses and request that the staff try to keep the light out of their eyes
- Use headphones to limit noise

PREPARE THE DENTIST AND STAFF

- Have a dental professional communicate effectively (educate effective communication)
- Instruct the staff that your child responds best to immediate praise for good behavior
- Let the staff know they need to ignore inappropriate behaviors
- Explain Tell / Show / Do
- Highlight what your child may be concerned about

FOR THE DENTIST

- Develop a relationship with your patient with autism
- Speak in a calm and soothing voice
- Get down to the child's level and be confident and reassuring
- Do not ask the child if they want to come with you but rather gently tell the child what you are doing next.
- Be consistent
- Ask the parent first if they have any suggestions to better meet the needs of the patient
- Dim the lights
- Turn down loud noises
- Turn on instruments so that the child can see them before the instruments go in their mouths
- Remove clutter that can cause distraction
- Let the child know what you will be doing - Let the child know ahead of time how long something is going to last
- Show the child on their hand how you will be counting their teeth so that they know what is going to happen
- Make sure to provide clear and accurate information when speaking with the child
- End each visit on a positive note, build on that success
- Sometimes it may take several visits in order to complete a dental exam
- Encourage a model. Modeling is also effective. Bring a long a sibling or friend and let your child with ASD watch as the dentist or hygienist performs the task
- Have the hygienist lean the chair back before the child sits in it

RESOURCES

- Autism Speaks
 - <http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/dental-tool-kit>
- Autism Support Network
 - <http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/taking-your-sondaughter-autism-spectrum-disorder-dentist-22783922>
- Healthy Smile App for iPhone and iPad
 - teaches children about good oral health and eases anxieties around dental visits.