



Oral health advice  
for parents and  
carers of autistic  
children and  
young people

[www.bspd.co.uk](http://www.bspd.co.uk)



British Society of  
Paediatric Dentistry

The British Society of Paediatric Dentistry (BSPD), the organisation of dentists and their teams who care for children's teeth and gums, has assembled some oral health advice for parents and carers of autistic children and young people. This advice has been written to support neurodivergent children or those with additional sensory needs.

We recognise that supporting an autistic child can present unique challenges, but we hope this advice may help you to support your child to achieve healthy teeth and gums for life, to give them the smile they deserve.

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## Background

As a parent or carer of an autistic child or young person, it may feel daunting to take them to the dentist for the first time. You may be anxious about how your child will react during the visit and also how the dental staff will respond to their needs.

This is totally understandable. Fear of the new and unknown can be quite overwhelming for an autistic child, but with planning and reasonable adjustments it is possible to make this experience a positive one.

Autistic children often process sensory information differently and they may be either less sensitive or extra sensitive to sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch. Having your teeth brushed and visiting the dental surgery can really challenge the senses. Sensory issues can be one of the main anxiety triggers for the autistic child in the dental surgery, so please let the dental team know if there is anything we can do to make their dental visit easier.

All these factors can influence how a child copes, not only with brushing at home but also with going to see the dentist.





## Is my autistic child more likely to get dental decay?

All teeth are at risk of developing tooth decay if exposed to sugary foods and drinks between meals, especially baby teeth, which have thin enamel. Current research suggests that an autistic child is no more likely to develop tooth decay than any other child. Some prescribed medicines or supplements may contain sugar, and some can cause a dry mouth, which makes dental decay more likely. Do request a sugar-free alternative from your child's doctor if possible.

## Diet and dental health

Dental decay is caused by frequent consumption of sugar. There may be challenges for parents or carers around choosing foods and drinks which are low in sugar.

### Your child may:

- be more likely to have feeding problems (this is often linked to sensory likes/dislikes)
- eat a narrower range of foods
- have a strong preference for foods of a particular colour or with familiar packaging

If your child has strong food preferences and struggles to eat a balanced diet, see if it is possible to limit the number of times they have sugary food and drinks during the day and to work towards leaving the “golden hour” before bed free of food and drinks except for water. It may not be possible to make big changes to their diet, but small changes can also make a big difference.

“My daughter has ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder) and has a pretty “beige” diet. I was so worried about her getting tooth decay on top of everything else, but I worked with her dietician and her dentist, and now we have made some changes which were workable for her and good for her teeth. I feel so relieved.”

Parent of an autistic child

# Getting your child off to the best start

Tooth decay is almost always preventable and by getting things right as early as possible, you may be able to avoid your child needing dental treatment. This is particularly important for autistic children because they may find dental treatment more challenging. It is also easier to develop good behaviours from the outset, rather than trying to change habits that have become established.



## Dental checkups

As soon as your child gets their first tooth, and certainly before their first birthday, it is time to arrange their first dental check-up.



# Toothbrushing at home

Brushing your child's teeth at home is really important. However, many autistic children find toothbrushing difficult to tolerate and it can become overwhelming. Ideally, toothbrushing should be introduced as soon as the first tooth comes through so that it becomes part of their daily routine.

“There is no way we can manage for two minutes. It's usually 30 seconds or maybe a minute at best. I used to feel so guilty that we were failing at yet another thing. Our health visitor suggested we focus on brushing the top teeth in the morning and the bottom teeth at night, which has really helped. We sometimes add another brush in after lunch because more, shorter attempts work better for us.”

Parent of an autistic child



## The parent or carer's role?

It is recommended that all children have help with tooth brushing until the age of about 7 years, as they don't have the hand skills to clean their teeth effectively. Autistic children may need help for longer than this. As a helpful comparison guide, a child is likely to need help up until they can tie their own shoe laces. When cleaning teeth, it may help to have two brushes – one for you and one for your child, as this will help them feel in control.

## What is the best way to brush my child's teeth?

Stand or sit behind and above your child, so that you can see where you are brushing and you can support your child's head. Ask for advice from your dentist, hygienist or therapist, who should be able to recommend a few positions and strategies to help you to clean effectively.



## When should we brush?

Ideally, twice daily – just before bed and at one other time, which doesn't have to be first thing in the morning. Before bed is the most important time, as the fluoride from the toothpaste will be able to stay on the teeth whilst your child is in bed. Remember to encourage your child to spit out excess toothpaste and to not rinse after brushing, as you want the benefits of the fluoride to last. If your child is feeling overwhelmed, you may wish to try again when they are feeling calmer.

“There are some days when I just know that brushing is not going to happen. If I force him, it just makes things worse. We have an agreement now that if he is really not in the mood, then we use a fluoride mouthwash instead and come back and try the brushing later.”

Parent of an autistic child

## Which toothpaste should we use?

Some children don't like the taste and texture of toothpaste and may prefer brands which are flavourless or low foaming, such as Oranurse toothpaste\*. Flavoured brands are also becoming increasingly popular, but please check with your dentist that they contain enough fluoride for your child. If you are really struggling, try brushing the teeth with water first and then rinse the brush and dab some fluoride toothpaste around the teeth.

Even if the brushing technique isn't perfect, and your child can't tolerate the full two minutes, getting fluoride toothpaste onto the teeth twice daily will make a difference in preventing tooth decay. The most important thing is to ensure that you choose a toothpaste containing at least 1000ppm and ideally 1450ppm fluoride. You can check the packaging of the toothpaste to find out.



Use a small smear until your child is 3, and a small pea-sized amount thereafter. Ask your dentist whether your child might benefit from using a higher fluoride toothpaste, which can be prescribed free of charge for children over the age of 10.

## Should I buy an electric toothbrush?

You don't need to buy an expensive electric toothbrush to brush your child's teeth. It is possible to do a perfectly good job with a cheaper, normal (manual) toothbrush. Choose one with a small head and medium bristles. Some autistic children, particularly those with sensory-seeking behaviours, may prefer an electric brush and find it helps them, whilst for others the noise and vibration can be very unpleasant.

Older children may find an electric one easier to use, especially if they have dyspraxia or co-ordination difficulties. If you do buy an electric toothbrush, choose one with a small oscillating head.

You can buy special toothbrushes\*, such as Dr Barmans or Oralieve which brush the sides and top of the teeth at the same time. This can help, especially if your child likes chewing the brush.



Because it can be difficult to brush an autistic child's teeth, their mouths may have more plaque and the gums might be more red and inflamed or even bleeding. This is usually a sign that they need more, rather than less brushing and that with improved and regular cleaning, the bleeding will stop and the gums will become firmer and look a healthy colour.



# Choosing your child's dental team

Many autistic children are well looked after by their family dentist, with or without adjustments. Most dentists will have received training on how best to approach dental appointments for autistic children. You may be able to ask for recommendations from your parent, carer or support networks to find a dental team who have supported other autistic families well.

If your child has significant learning delay or other medical conditions, they may benefit from a referral to a Community Dental team, especially if sedation or general anaesthetic may be required for their dental treatment. Your family dentist can make this referral for your child.



# My child's first check-up

From the moment you enter the waiting room, dental practices can be bright, noisy and very busy places. Children may find this distressing, however, as long as the practice knows about your child's sensory needs, with some consideration and sensible adjustments, the impact can be minimised.



## For example:

Make sure the practice staff know in advance that your child is autistic.

You could ask to arrange one (or more!) quick "hello" visits beforehand so that your child can get used to the journey to the surgery, to the environment and the people who work there.

If your child is particularly anxious about the dental practice environment, you may want to ask the dentist to pop down to the car (if you have driven), so that your child can meet them for the first time in a familiar environment.

The dental team may have a picture story (social story) of the dental appointment and what will happen. If not, they may allow you to take photos on your phone to make your own.

Some dentists will ask you to fill in a questionnaire or passport which specifically asks how autism affects your child e.g. sensory areas, likes and dislikes, dietary preferences and communication aids.

Take anything with you which might help your child to settle and feel less anxious in the new environment e.g. toys, electronic devices or blankets.

You might like to ask for a visit at the beginning of the day when the waiting room is likely to be quieter and your child will not have to wait too long to be seen. Alternatively, if afternoons work better for your child, you might wish to request the first appointment after lunch.

Ask your practice if there is a particular dentist within their team who has experience of caring for autistic children.

Other things that may help your child include occasional movement breaks, wearing a weighted apron, having noise-cancelling headphones with you and the use of fidgets. You will probably know best which, if any, of these tools are helpful to your child.



## How will I know if my child has toothache?

Some autistic children may have difficulty expressing pain. It is therefore important to keep an eye out for unexplained changes in behaviour, such as disturbed sleep, otherwise unexplained emotional outbursts, changes in patterns of eating or self-harm.

Some children who are sensory-seeking might continually put things such as fingers, toys, or other objects in their mouth. It is easy to think that the child is doing this because of toothache, but this is not always the case. It is important to get this checked out by the dentist as these habits can sometimes damage the gums or cause mouth ulcers due to friction.

## What happens if my child needs dental treatment?

If your child needs treatment, there are usually a number of options available. The most suitable way of carrying out the treatment will be discussed with you and your child and will depend on a number of factors.

### These may include:

1. The type and amount of treatment needed
2. Your child's age, understanding, behaviour and communication
3. Your child's sensory needs

Some children are able to accept dental treatment whilst they are awake in the dental chair if their dentist and the dental team take a slow and gentle approach. Other children may need extra help such as inhalation sedation (happy air/ laughing gas) which tends to work best for children who are able to communicate and are not too scared.

However, other children may require treatment under general anaesthesia (whilst they are asleep). The advantage of this is that all the treatment can be completed at one time. All the teeth with decay will need to be treated in order to reduce the chance of this procedure having to be repeated.

General anaesthetics are carried out safely in hospital settings with highly trained staff. Some disadvantages of this approach are that the environment will be unfamiliar, the family may have to travel to the hospital, and the child will need to have food and drink restricted beforehand. As

with visiting the dentist, you can ask the clinical team if you can prepare your child with a photo journey. Also, you can ask your dental team when they make the referral if your child can be placed 'first on the list', to minimise waiting time. It may be possible to work with a play therapist at the hospital who will support you and your child. You can also download symbols and storyboards (Widgit symbols, for example) from the internet to help prepare your child.



## Further reading:

The National Autistic Society has a page about going to the dentist. You can also find books designed to support people with autism or learning difficulties on the Books Beyond Words website. Some people with autism find photo stories very helpful and you can find specific symbol sheets on the Widgit-health website. "Ambitious about Autism" is a campaigning group set up by parents and carers who want to make the ordinary possible for children and young people with autism. Links to all these resources are below:

### The National Autistic Society

- [www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/going-to-the-dentist](http://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/going-to-the-dentist) <http://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/bookshop/going-to-the-dentist>
- [www.widgit-health.com](http://www.widgit-health.com) provides communication support for healthcare professionals - search for downloadable easy-to-read symbol sheets - 'My visit to the dentist', 'In the dentist's room', 'After the dentist', 'My silver tooth', 'My dental X-ray' and 'My day case operation'
- [www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk](http://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk)

### ToothPASTE study & toolkit

- The ToothPASTE website has some helpful information for parents and carers of autistic children
- [www.linktr.ee/toothpastestudy](http://www.linktr.ee/toothpastestudy)
- [www.autismtoothcare.com](http://www.autismtoothcare.com)



Discover additional oral health guidance from Autism Central for Parents and Carers here: [www.autismcentral.org.uk](http://www.autismcentral.org.uk)





For further information,  
please visit our website:  
[www.bspd.co.uk](http://www.bspd.co.uk)

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