

Due to their sensory processing patterns, many children with Autism find it difficult to tolerate everyday self-care activities such as brushing teeth. Dentist visits may be particularly distressing and children may: have a tendency to pull away from or over-react to unexpected touch (particularly touch to the face); exhibit fear responses to moving backwards in the dental chair, the noises of the dental equipment, unexpected office noises (intercoms, door alarms or beeps); have difficulty tolerating the bright light above their head; extreme dislike of the taste of polishing paste. Here are a few things to try with your child which may ease their discomfort during dental care activities.

Sensory Strategies

- Deep pressure activities around the mouth prior to brushing teeth will help to desensitise this area. This can include chewing on a chewy tube or snack and massage around the jaw and mouth (if massage is not tolerated, demonstrate massaging your own mouth and jaw and encourage the child to copy.)
- Experiment with different toothbrushes to establish preferences – e.g. hard/soft bristles.
- Try using an electric toothbrush – the vibration will make the brushing sensation easier to tolerate. Be aware that some children may dislike the noise of an electric toothbrush so this may need to be introduced gradually.
- If your child cannot tolerate tooth brushing at all use a flannel initially (start outside of mouth and around cheeks);
- Try brushing teeth in front of the mirror so that the child can see what is happening;
- Consider other sensory stimuli within the environment (brush teeth in a quiet, uncluttered environment where possible);
- Encourage the child to brush their own teeth wherever possible – this will help them to get used to the sensation whilst they are in control.

Other Strategies

- Use visuals/timers to structure the activity and prepare your child;
- Prepare the child beforehand by telling them how many brush strokes you are going to do. Count these out loud or using visuals (according to individual needs);
- Incorporate teeth brushing into play, for example using dolls or stories. This provides an opportunity for your child to explore and become familiar with tooth brushes in a relaxed environment;
- Use a teeth brushing song to support your child to follow the sequence of brushing their teeth;
- Use motivators and rewards to encourage participation and cooperation in teeth brushing;
- Trial adapted toothbrushes such as the Collis Curve toothbrush or Dr. Barman's superbrush (child). Both brushes allow carers to access teeth of children who may be reluctant to open their mouth fully with greater ease than a normal toothbrush. The brushes also enable brushing to be done effectively in a shorter time as they reach more teeth surfaces at once;
- Chlorhexidine spray or mouthwash can be used as an additional way to reduce plaque. Try cleaning the mouth and tongue with a gloved finger wrapped in gauze soaked in chlorhexidine mouthwash;
- Your child may be more comfortable sitting down for teeth brushing than standing.

Dentist Visits

- Have the child wear the X-ray vest during the entire appointment to provide extra weight and deep pressure;
- Provide oral deep pressure or vibration in the form of electric toothbrush, mini massager, or rubbing with oral swabs prior to appointment;
- Provide something very chewy for the child to eat prior to the appointment;
- Allow the child to have a fidget toy that provides "heavy work" during the session;
- Use firm touch whenever supporting the child;
- Verbally warn the child before each thing you do/allow them to see what you are doing;
- Allow child to wear something that blocks the bright lights if he/she is sensitive to this.
- Allow the child to listen to calming music over headphones if dentist noises are distressing.
- There is a specialist ASD paediatric dentist at Kensington and Chelsea Hospital. There is normally a very long waiting list, so you may wish to try a non-specialist dentist. OT are unable to recommend specific dentists, but numerous children from Queensmill see a dentist at Park View Health Centre.
- Occupational Therapy can provide visuals for your child's dentist visit as well as an information sheet to give to the dentist about tactile sensitivities in children with Autism.

If you have any concerns about your child's teeth cleaning, discuss with their OT, school nurse or teacher.