

# Oral Health for Autistic Children

## A GUIDE FOR ADULTS



Every Child  
is Unique



Dental Health  
Foundation  
Ireland

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RCN 20010683



**This booklet is designed to support parents and carers of autistic children in promoting good oral health. It offers practical tips to help you establish a dental care routine that suits your child's unique needs.**

**While this resource provides valuable information, we encourage you to consult your dental team for personalised advice and care tailored specifically to your child.**



RCN: 20010683

The Dental Health Foundation Ireland (DHF) is Ireland's only independent charity focused on enhancing oral health and well-being in Ireland.

Established by dentists in 1977, the DHF has led the way in oral health promotion, collaborating with the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive, the dental sector, educational institutions, and stakeholder and community groups nationwide.

# Introduction

## Good Oral Health from the Start

Every child is wonderfully unique. For autistic children and those with sensory processing difficulties (SPDs), personalised oral care is important and traditional dental advice might need to change to fit their unique needs.

A healthy mouth is not just about smiles: it is about eating, talking, and learning too! Autistic children and those with SPD may find it harder to care for their teeth and gums. This can lead to problems like tooth decay and gum disease that can cause pain, infection, difficulties eating, sleeping and paying attention in school.

Most dental problems can be prevented, and while access to appropriate health care is vital, families can do a lot to keep their child's smile sparkling bright!



# How Autism / SPD Affect Oral Health

Autistic children often develop common habits that can harm their teeth, like:

Teeth Grinding

Tongue Thrusting

Scratching Gums

Biting Lips

Some may have eating habits like pocketing food in their cheeks or chewing non-food items like gravel or pens, which can contribute to damaging teeth.

Autistic children may have a higher risk of tooth decay, especially if they eat sticky, sweet foods or find tooth brushing challenging.



# Tooth Brushing Tips

Help reduce the risk of tooth decay and promote good oral health.

- 🦷 Brush teeth as soon as the first tooth appears.
- 🦷 Children under two years of age do not need toothpaste, unless advised by your dentist. Those over 2 years of age can use a pea-sized amount of adult fluoride toothpaste (1450 ppm). **Teach them to spit out and do not rinse in order to keep fluoride working.**
- 🦷 Brush teeth for as long as it takes to clean all tooth surfaces: inside, outside and the chewing parts of all teeth.
- 🦷 Brush teeth at bedtime to remove food and plaque that builds up over the day. Also brush at one other time in the day, that will work for your child, as part of their typical daily routine.
- 🦷 Help your child understand when the tooth brushing task will end by playing a favourite song or using an egg timer.
- 🦷 If your child needs help with tooth brushing, stand behind your child with their head against your chest or have them on your lap, with a pillow for support. Supervise for as long as needed.
- 🦷 Use pictures or videos to show each step. Brushing together can make the routine clearer. Remember to give lots of praise and encouragement.



## Choosing the Right Toothbrush

There are many good toothbrushes available. Try different kinds, colours and designs. Your child can pick which one to use.

### Manual Toothbrushes



Choose a small-headed, soft-bristled toothbrush. If your child finds it tricky to hold, ask your dental team how to make the handle easier to grip.

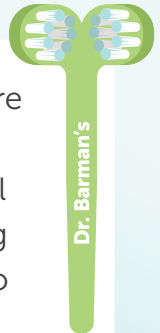


Electric or battery-powered toothbrushes can be game-changers for those who struggle with manual brushes. Their rotating heads are very good at removing plaque. Some children might not love the feeling or noise, but others might find it fascinating particularly hyposensitive children. It can help them get used to different sensations for their dental visits.

### Electric Toothbrushes

### Specialised Toothbrushes

Double and triple-sided toothbrushes are a great option and available online or in some pharmacies. They help to clean all tooth surfaces at once, making brushing time quicker and easier for children who find tooth brushing difficult, e.g. Collis Curve or Dr. Barman's Superbrush.



## Diet Tips for Children with Restricted Eating / ARFID

A healthy diet is the best step to keep their smiles bright. Avoid sweet snacks and drinks as a reward for good behaviour. Encourage your child to drink plenty of tap water to rinse away food. Medications with sugar can increase the risk of tooth decay and non-sugar options may be available. Ask your dental team about fluoride treatments and dental sealants to reduce decay risk.



It can be upsetting and worrying when a child's condition affects their eating habits. When certain foods are rejected, it makes it tough to follow typical advice on healthy eating. Here are some food tips to help maintain your child's dental health while respecting their unique dietary preferences and challenges:

**Food Chaining:** Start with foods that the child likes, then use small changes to work towards a new food.

**Mealtime Routine:** Establish a regular schedule with three balanced meals and no more than two nutritious healthy snacks per day.

**Encourage Healthy Choices:** Help your child to select healthy foods they enjoy, like fresh fruits, breadsticks, cheese, and plain yogurt. Encourage drinking tap water after a meal or a snack.

**Choose Tooth-Friendly Drinks:** Try tap water and milk instead of squash, sugary fruit drinks and carbonated beverages.

## Toothpastes

There are many toothpastes to choose from, like non-mint flavours, unflavoured, and non-foaming e.g. Oranurse; especially for children who are hypersensitive. Your child can pick the one that works best for them. If your child has tooth decay, the dentist might prescribe higher fluoride toothpaste.



## Dental Visits

Dental visits can be stressful because of sensory factors like bright lights, strange noises, unusual smells, busy waiting areas and new faces to meet.

### Prepare Ahead

Talk to the dental team about your child and their sensitivities before the visit. Plan a trial visit to help your child get familiar with the environment. Practice at home before a visit. Role-play the routine of sitting in the chair and mouth-opening. Let the dental team know what works best.

### Keep Visits Short and Often

Regular visits can help build a routine, but keep expectations realistic. Every child will go at their own pace. Spread treatment over several visits to reduce stress and help your child to build trust with the dental team.



## Visual Schedules and Social Stories

Creating a visual guide or social story that explains step by step what to expect can help prepare your child for the visit e.g. "Tom Goes to the Dentist".

## Comforters and Distractions

Take along a favourite toy or blanket to the visit. If appropriate, let your child listen to music during the appointment to help them relax. Talk to the dental team about using distractions such as games, phones and tablets to help your visit go smoothly.



# Useful Resources



DentalHealth.ie  
'Tom Goes to the Dentist'



DentalHealth.ie  
Resources



Autism Little Learners  
Social Stories



Food Chaining





# Notes

## Appointment Times:

- |    |    |
|----|----|
| 1. | 5. |
| 2. | 6. |
| 3. | 7. |
| 4. | 8. |

Dentist:

Hygienist:

Nurse:

Dental Office Phone No.:

Dental Office Email:

**Get in touch with us:**

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**FAQs**



**ASIAM** 

**AUTISM INFOLINE**

**Open From:**  
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**Phone:** 0818 234 234

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A purple rectangular card with white text and icons. At the top, it features the 'ASIAM' logo in blue and green, followed by a white speech bubble icon containing a telephone handset. Below this, it says 'AUTISM INFOLINE'. The card lists opening hours: 'Open From: Monday - Thursday 10am - 3pm'. It also provides contact information: 'Phone: 0818 234 234', 'Instant Message: AsIAM.ie', and 'Email: support@asiam.ie'. Each contact method is enclosed in a white rounded rectangle.