

Supporting Oral Health in Individuals with Autism

Oral health is a cornerstone of overall well-being. Yet for many individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), maintaining good oral hygiene and attending dental visits can be particularly challenging. The unfamiliar tastes and textures of dental products may overwhelm those with sensory sensitivities, and dental environments can easily become overstimulating. If your child or loved one experiences fear or anxiety around dental care, you are not alone.



In this article, the Lurie Center's Jill Pineda, PhD, and Massachusetts General Hospital dentist Jennifer Magee, DMD, MPH, share insights on the importance of dental health and offer strategies to help make dental visits smoother and less stressful.

Why Teeth Matter

Teeth play essential roles in eating, nutrition, speech, and expression. "Baby teeth are sometimes undervalued," says Dr. Magee, "but one of the big things they do is hold space so that adult teeth have room to come in properly."

A full set of healthy teeth allows us to chew a variety of foods, supports clear speech, and contributes to confidence and social connection. Oral health also directly affects overall health: the 2000 Surgeon General's Report emphasized that good oral health is integral to good general health. Gum disease, for example, can worsen conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

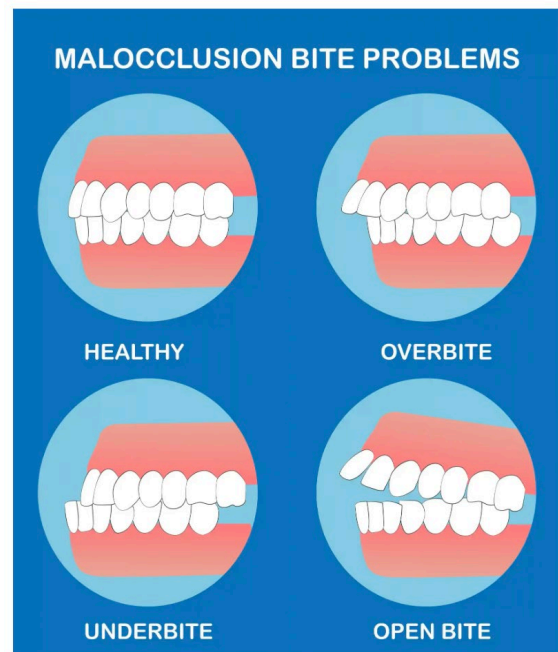
Although baby teeth usually erupt between 6 and 12 months, tooth formation actually occurs before birth. There is a wide range of variability of when a first tooth may appear above the gum line. "We tend to find in patients with autism that there can be delay of eruption of those teeth by almost a year," says Dr. Magee. "That can cause some problems as the jaw is growing. There can be crowding issues and other spacing issues." Orthodontic care can help address these challenges.

Common Dental Concerns

"Very few people have teeth that are perfectly aligned and stay perfectly aligned over time," notes Dr. Magee. However, misalignment, or malocclusion, can make teeth harder to clean and may lead to cavities, gum disease, or discomfort. Cavities develop when bacteria convert sugars into acids that erode enamel. Sticky snacks, frequent snacking or sipping on a sugar-containing beverage throughout the day, and limited brushing or flossing increase risk. "Pocketing food", a behavior where individuals hold food in their mouth without swallowing, is also a risk factor for cavities. This behavior is seen more commonly among individuals with ASD. Occupational and speech therapists can help evaluate and treat this behavior.

Gum disease begins when plaque irritates the gums, causing inflammation (gingivitis). Without proper brushing and flossing, it can progress to periodontitis, leading to bone loss and loose teeth. Brushing and flossing regularly are critical preventative measures, but can be challenging. “Often it takes trying a lot of different things,” says Dr. Magee. “Sometimes a regular manual toothbrush can work, sometimes an electric toothbrush is better”. She encourages families to experiment with the wide variety of different flavors and textures of toothpaste available to find something that works for them.

Clenching and grinding are also common. While often associated with stress, they can stem from many things including malocclusion, sensory-seeking behaviors, or medication side effects. Over time, these habits can cause enamel wear, sensitivity, muscle pain, and headaches. Dentists can offer strategies and protective devices to help.



Overcoming Barriers to Care

Anxiety and fear of medical procedures are common, and one negative experience can have long-lasting effects. Bright lights, unfamiliar sounds, and sensations can overwhelm the senses. Environmental factors (waiting rooms, noises), fast-paced appointments, and providers unfamiliar with autism can add further challenges.

“Parent or caregiver demeanor can really change a child’s behavior and anxiety,” says Dr. Pineda. Excessive reassurance, criticism, or apologies can sometimes heighten distress. “In general, you want to try to limit attention to unwanted behaviors—if there is a lot of whining or protest—‘I don’t want to do this’—try to redirect and offer distractions.” She recommends talking about preferred interests and incorporating humor as much as possible.

“It’s really important that you pay attention to where you are putting your attention,” she adds. “You want to give lots of specific and positive praise about what your child or loved one is doing well.” For example: *“I love the way you are holding still and keeping your mouth open for the doctor,”* or *“I love the way you are waiting patiently for the doctor.”* Giving positive and specific praise encourages your child or loved one to try to engage in that behavior.

Preparation & Strategies

Dr. Pineda emphasizes the importance of talking about what to expect well before the appointment. “The first thing you want to do is to talk about it. In general, you don’t want to make it a surprise,” says Dr. Pineda. Parents or caregivers can start by explaining who the dentist is—“it’s a doctor who checks your teeth and gums”—and why visits are important: to help teeth stay clean, healthy, and strong, and to support overall body health. She also suggests discussing the risks of not going to the dentist. “Most important,” she adds,

“be honest about what to expect. It’s hard to talk about the pain and it’s easier to say it’s not going to hurt, but it’s really important to be mindful of any kind of pain or discomfort that they might feel and be honest.”

Dr. Pineda recommends reviewing a social story or looking at pictures of what to expect. While this will vary depending on a person’s cognitive and communication needs, walking through pictures can be a helpful form of desensitization. “When I put my neuropsychologist hat on,” says Dr. Pineda, “this [social stories] is a tool that really supports communication and understanding of what to expect.”



Source: The Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative (ASERT)

Whenever possible, she suggests reducing uncertainty ahead of time by visiting the dental office or viewing photos of the space. “That is one less thing that someone has to anticipate or be surprised by,” she says.

Practice at home can also help build comfort and understanding. Dr. Pineda suggests modeling what will happen during the visit—for example, setting a timer and having your loved one sit back and open their mouth to get used to the experience. “This physical practice is what often makes the difference in the long term,” she notes.

Small Steps, Big Progress

Building positive dental experiences takes time. Prioritize gradual desensitization, use positive reinforcement, and celebrate small successes along the way. With patience, preparation, and the right support, individuals with ASD can achieve better oral health—and more confident smiles.

Resources

- Autism and Dental Care Coffee Convo Webinar (recorded July 2024)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk_1mgZP6-w
- Autism Speaks toolkit: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/autism-dental-care>
- The Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative (ASERT) websites social stories for dental care: <https://paautism.org/resource/dentist-social-stories/>
- University of Washington School of Dentistry Guide for Parents/Caregivers:
<https://dental.washington.edu/dept-oral-med/special-needs/autism-spectrum-disorder-parents-caregivers/>

Jennifer Magee, DMD, MPH, is a general dentist at Mass General Hospital. She has been at MGH since 2007 and is currently the chief of Dentistry. She sees patients of all ages and treats patients in the clinic as well as the operating room.

Jill Pineda, PhD, is a psychologist at the Lurie Center for Autism. She does neuropsychological assessments and therapy, with a particular interest and expertise in medical desensitization, or helping patients tolerate medical care.

Tips for parents and caregivers

- Talk about the dental visit in advance (avoid surprises).
- Use social stories or videos to preview what will happen.
- Practice at home: sitting back, opening the mouth, or role-playing with a toothbrush or stuffed animal.
- Aim for gradual exposure and frequent short visits.
- Be honest about potential discomfort.
- Incorporate comfort from home items (e.g., toys, music)
- Avoid restraint whenever possible.
- Use positive reinforcement and humor.

Want more support? Dr. Pineda offers a virtual workshop for parents/caregivers:

Parent Desensitization Training Series

This in-depth group training is offered to parents of children aged 3 years and older. Parents will learn desensitization techniques, a gradual approach used to reduce anxiety. Sessions will include information about desensitization for shots/medical procedures and pill swallowing. Participants will learn behavioral strategies that can be utilized at home, useful preparations for procedures and recommendations for ways to work with medical providers. Each group will meet virtually over three sessions. This group training is an insurance-billable group under the child's insurance. Please send your full name and insurance information when applying.

TIME: 12:00pm - 1:00pm

COST: Insurance billable under the child's insurance

DATES: This 3-session series is held three times per year on consecutive Tuesdays in March, June and October.

Registration is required. Contact the Lurie Center at LurieCenter@mgb.org or 781-860-1700 to reserve your spot.