

Healthy Smiles Across the “Spectrum”

Autism is a complex developmental disability that impairs communication and social, behavioral, and intellectual functioning, according to the National Institutes of Health. Autism symptoms and severity vary widely, though, so the term “autism spectrum disorders” (ASD) is commonly used to describe a group of disorders with similar features. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that 1 to 1.5 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder. The CDC also states that 1 in every 110 children (and 1 in every 70 boys) is born with an autism spectrum disorder. A 2009 National Children’s Health Survey found that 1 percent of U.S. children ages 3–17 have an autism spectrum disorder. That percentage may seem small, but when it comes to ensuring that a child with autism is maintaining proper oral health, the challenges can be big.

Dental care is the leading unmet health care among children with special needs, according to the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center. And what’s more, a 2010 study published in *Pediatric Dentistry* stated that oral hygiene may be the most important risk indicator for new cavities in children with autism spectrum disorders. Some children diagnosed with ASD may appear distant, aloof, or detached from other people or their surroundings. Others may not react appropriately to common verbal and social cues, such as a parent’s voice or smile. More symptoms of autism may include obsessive routines, repetitive behaviors, unpredictable body movements, and self-injurious behavior. All of these symptoms can add to the challenge of adopting proper dental care habits.

It is with this in mind that the National Museum of Dentistry, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, joined forces with the Kennedy Krieger Institute’s Center for Autism and Related Disorders and the University of Maryland Dental

Oral Health Care for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

School to develop *Healthy Smiles for Autism*, a free guide to oral health care for children with ASD. The aim of the guide is to empower parents of these children by providing them with tools to help effectively teach their children an oral health care routine. The guide also provides information to help parents prepare their children for a first dental visit.

The brochure features easy-to-follow steps that parents can incorporate into a routine for both themselves and their child. For example, the section on brushing and flossing stresses how important it is to make sure your child is comfortable. For most of us, the bathroom is the place we brush our teeth, but parents of a child with ASD should be aware that the child may be uncomfortable in that environment, and the guide suggests you find another setting where your child is more comfortable. You should set up a specific place for brushing and flossing, a room that he or she can associate with these activities. The place you choose should be relaxing to the child and address his or her sensory needs (e.g., take into account the child’s reactions to light and sound). You will also want to be sure to create a special place for your child’s dental supplies in the room. Lastly, you will want to be consistent and bring your child to this same room each time he or she brushes and flosses.

The guide also offers visual sequencing cards—step-by-step instructions and illustrations—that help you show your child every detail of how to brush and floss, as well as what to expect at the dentist’s office. These visuals can help you introduce the concepts of oral care to your child and may alleviate some of his or her anxiety.

“We want to be able to give parents readily usable tools to help their children develop a good oral hygiene regimen,” says Jonathan Landers, executive director of the National Museum of Dentistry. “We’ve combined best practices for autism education, such as visual sequencing cards and rewards systems, with proven personal oral hygiene techniques to help make the process a little bit easier.”

The 36-page guide can be viewed and downloaded at www.healthysmilesforautism.org.



Visual sequencing cards offer step-by-step instructions on oral hygiene.

Photo Credit: National Museum of Dentistry

