

Supporting children with autism to look after their teeth

Author: Samira Amiri, Occupational Therapist Assistant at Hillingdon Manor School



Introduction

Children with autism often process sensory information differently and they can be either less sensitive or extra sensitive to sights, sounds, smell, taste 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 children with autism.

The strategies may differ between individuals dependent on their sensory needs and preferences.

Sensory Strategies for Teeth Brushing

We all take in sensory information from our bodies and the world around us. Our brains are programmed to organise or “integrate” this sensory information to make it meaningful to us. This integration allows us to respond automatically, efficiently and comfortably in response to the specific sensory input we receive.

The sensory information that children receive from their body and from the environment whilst

brushing their teeth may be processed differently.

Brushing teeth is a sensory experience. Some children are resistant to toothbrush bristles and / or certain textures / flavours of toothpaste. Here are some sensory strategies to help make tooth brushing a fun and tolerable experience.

Proprioception

Proprioception is the unconscious awareness of the body position. It tells us about the position of our body parts, their relation to each other and their relation to other people and objects. It communicates how much force muscles exert and allows us to grade our movements.

- Tap the child’s gums firmly from centre to each side on the upper and lower gums
- Attempt to desensitize your child’s face, lips, and inner mouth for the tooth brushing
- Partly place a portion of a damp, slightly warm washcloth into his/her mouth. Encourage him/her

to bite down on it while you gently tug on it as tolerated.

- To decrease sensitivity, apply pressure to the teeth and gums
- Prepare for teeth brushing by applying gentle pressure to the outside of the lips and along the jaw
- Try a vibrating toothbrush
- Use pressure touch with firm strokes
- Try joint compression to the neck, shoulders and body to prepare for teeth brushing

Vestibular

The vestibular system provides information about movement, gravity and changing head positions. It tells us that we are moving or remaining still as well as the direction and speed of our movement.

- Promote balance by standing behind your child to secure the body
- Encourage your child to lean against the sink with his/her body if you are not available
- If changes in head position are difficult, have the toothbrush and rinse water ready for the child or teach them how to prepare for the task
- Use a mirror

Tactile

- If your child is very sensitive, consider using a face cloth to wipe the teeth
- Try a Nuk brush initially then move to bristles
- Electric toothbrushes can be lots of fun! An electric toothbrush provides consistent sensation and may be better tolerated than a traditional toothbrush. They are also helpful when hand and arm strength is reduced
- Your child may also benefit from using a toothbrush with a thicker handle, as this will be easier to hold
- Warm water may be better tolerated than cold

Vision

- Use a mirror to predict sensation
- Be aware of light bouncing off reflective surfaces
- Use a dimmer on light switches
- Try a toothbrush that lights up for the duration of tooth brushing

Auditory

- The sound of vibration or the toothbrush may be a lot to process; try distracting with music or countdowns
- The reflected sounds may be challenging to process; try noise cancelling headphones
- Try a toothbrush that sings

Smell/Taste

- Rinse the mouth with warm water frequently if your child has difficulty tolerating the toothpaste
- Consider the taste of the toothpaste. Use a very mild toothpaste, a flavourless toothpaste, a flavoured toothpaste or bicarbonate of soda. Experiment with different brands
- Use less, or start without using any toothpaste

Practical strategies to encourage teeth brushing

It is easier to develop good behaviours from the outset, rather than trying to change behaviours that are bad for dental health once they have become established. As soon as your child gets their first teeth, and certainly before their first birthday, introduce teeth brushing and arrange their first dental check-up.

- Make tooth brushing part of your child's daily routine
- Find a tooth brush that is something that they are interested in
- Keep it fun and encourage your child to role-play 'brushing' a toy's teeth or your teeth
- Make tooth brushing a game - Attack of the cavities, make brushing away the "germ bugs"

a fun game or enjoy some tooth brushing activities.

- Try reading your child stories or showing them books that feature tooth brushing or pictures of the sequence of brushing
- Reward charts may be helpful
- Have a visual sand timer or sing a favourite song for the duration of the task, to let your child know how long brushing will take
- Try a Timer App. There are lots of free Apps you can download for a smart phone or tablet. There is a free Oral-B Disney App that has a timer with characters
- Count to a specified number each time they brush. Once that number is reached, tooth brushing is over
- Try brushing teeth while in the bathtub

Recommended Tooth Brushes:

- Oral Swabs
- NUK Toothbrush
- Infa-Dent Finger Toothbrush
- Electric Toothbrush
- Suction Toothbrush
- Dentrust 3 sided toothbrush
- Soft Child's Bristle Toothbrush
- Chewable toothbrush

How do I know if my child has a toothache?

Some children with autism may have difficulty in 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 and self-harm.

Some children who are sensory-seeking might continually put things such as fingers, hands or

objects in their mouth. This is known as stimming. It is easy to think that the child is doing this because of toothache but this is not always the case, it might be their stim. If your child stims in this way keep an eye on their gums and teeth as these habits can sometimes damage the gums or cause mouth ulcers due to friction. Regular trips to the dentist would be advisable.

We have completed a help sheet on Visits to the Dentist, which can be accessed here: www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources

Useful Resources

- The top 11 brushing apps - <http://www.orthodonticslimited.com/teeth/top-11-brushing-apps-for-kids/>
- YouTube – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxMrtK-kYnE>
- <https://www.bspd.co.uk/Portals/0/BSPD%20Advice%20for%20parents%20of%20children%20with%20autism%20Jan%202017.pdf>
- <https://www.optionsautism.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Options-Dentist-Help-Sheet-Issue-6.pdf>
- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/documents/dentalguide.pdf>

References

- Yack, E, Aquilla, P, Sutton, S (2015) Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration (3rd Ed).

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