
Autism Society
Inland Empire
PLAY
& Grow
Oral & Dental Health

Helping Your Child Take Care of Their Smile





Welcome to the "Play & Grow" Collection!

This guide helps you support your child in building healthy dental habits. Oral health and dental care challenges are common in young children, especially those who may show signs of developmental differences like Autism or ADHD—and they can feel overwhelming for the entire family. A 2024 study highlights that children with developmental disabilities are less likely to access dental care, increasing the likelihood of oral health issues.

However, key strategies and suggestions can help make their dental care less stressful and more comfortable at home and at the dental office. The information you'll find here is based on research and dental experts' experience. Read on to learn more about these helpful strategies to support your child's smile.

What You'll Find Inside:

- Ideas for promoting healthy oral health habits
- Making toothbrushing sensory-friendly
- How to create a daily dental care routine
- Visual support to help with tooth-brushing
- Strategies to help with a successful dental visit

Be patient—new habits take time to show results. With consistency and care, these strategies can help your child establish good oral health and dental care habits. If you have any questions, the Autism Society Inland Empire is here to help. You can reach our Resource Specialists by email at info@ieautism.org or by calling 951.220.6922. We hope this brings comfort and understanding to your family and helps your child thrive.

In service to our community,
Autism Society Inland Emprire Team



This guide is intended for educational purposes and should not replace medical or dental advice from your child's healthcare providers.

Why Oral Health Matters





The Autism Society Inland Empire maintains a list of dentists who have experience treating children with Autism

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and the American Dental Association recommend that **children visit a dentist by their first birthday or within six months of the first tooth erupting, whichever comes first.**

Early dental visits help families learn how to care for their child's teeth, establish a dental home, and identify potential concerns before they become more serious.

Autism Society
Inland Empire



Why Oral Health Can Be More Challenging for Autistic Children

Not every child with Autism will feel comfortable caring for their teeth right away—and that's okay. Every child is unique, and it may take time to figure out what they need to brush and floss successfully. Some children may be able to tell you when something doesn't feel right, while others will communicate through their behaviors or nonverbal cues. Paying attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues can help you understand your child's needs.

Why Oral Health Can Be More Challenging for Autistic Children

Research indicates that children, teens and adults with Autism may experience the following:

Sensory Sensitivities
- Toothbrush textures
- Toothpaste flavors
- Bright examination lights
- Dental instrument sounds
- Strong smells
- Touch inside the mouth

Motor Challenges
- Difficulty holding a toothbrush
- Limited hand strength
- Oral-motor differences
- Limited ability to spit out toothpaste

Executive Functioning Differences
- Remembering to brush
- Starting and completing oral care tasks may require extra reminders and support.
- Following multiple steps
- Staying focused

Behavioral Challenges
- Resistance to brushing
- Difficulty staying seated
- Increased anxiety during transitions
- Difficulty keeping mouth open



Communication Challenges
- Difficulty expressing pain
- Limited understanding of dental procedures
- Difficulty following directions
- Anxiety about unfamiliar environments

Selective Eating Patterns
- Strong preferences for certain textures, tastes, colors, or familiar foods may limit dietary variety.
- Some children prefer processed, starchy, sticky, or high-carbohydrate foods that can increase the risk of cavities.
- Avoidance of certain foods may affect overall nutrition and oral health.
- Limited acceptance of new foods can make it difficult to adopt tooth-friendly dietary habit.

starting EARLY IS KEY

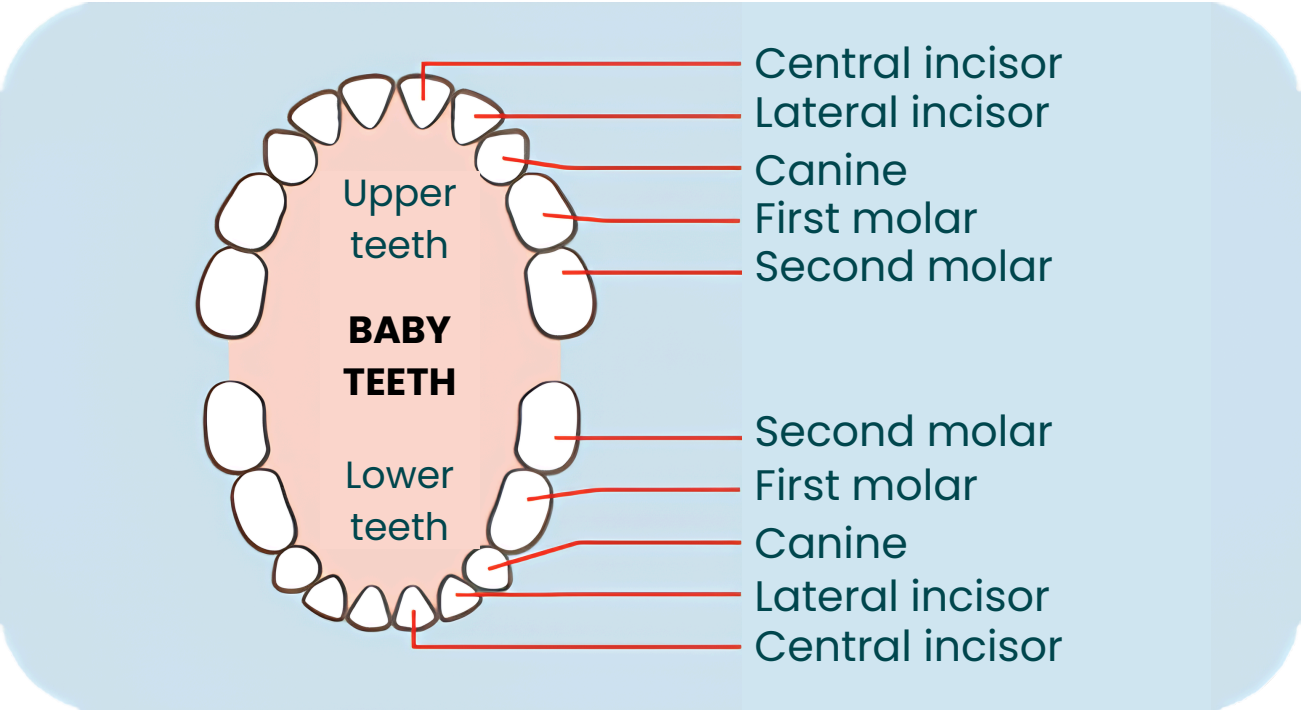


Building Positive Oral Hygiene Habits at Home



Building Positive Oral Hygiene Habits at Home

Starting early is key to building good dental habits. Typically, a baby's first tooth appears between six and twelve months of age. By age three, most children will have a complete set of 20 primary teeth. Understanding this timeline can help you know what to expect and support your child's oral health and care as their teeth develop. Consistency is key when helping children care for their teeth. You can build good oral and dental habits early with small, consistent steps each day. With patience, praise, and support, children can begin to see brushing as a positive part of their daily routine.



Source: RaisingChildren.net.au

Create A Daily Routine



Children often do best with a predictable routine, and it does not have to be long. In fact, a short routine done every day is more effective than a long one done infrequently. The goal is to find a routine that works for your child. First, brush your child's teeth at the same time each morning and night. Repeating the steps every day at the same time helps your child know what to expect and can reduce anxiety or stress.

A daily visual schedule can also make the process more familiar and less drawn out. It is also recommended to use the same words such as "first teeth, then story", to signal to your child in what order the steps will happen.

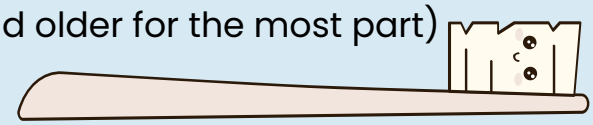
The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (2025) notes that some children with sensory or developmental needs may benefit from hands-on support beyond the age of 8. When children feel more comfortable and supported, brushing can become a more positive and manageable part of their daily routine.

Begin cleaning gums before teeth erupt. You can use the following:

- Soft infant washcloth
- Silicone finger brush
- Infant toothbrush

Once teeth appear, do the following:

- Brush teeth twice a day
- Use a soft-bristled toothbrush
- Use fluoride toothpaste (rice-sized amount under age 3; pea-sized amount beginning at age 3 unless otherwise advised by the dentist)
- Floss when appropriate (2 years and older for the most part)





If your child uses medications containing sugar or experiences dry mouth, discuss additional care with the dentist.

Nutrition & Oral Health

Nutrition and oral health go hand in hand. Maintaining good oral health also means creating healthy eating habits from an early age. Taking care of your child's teeth helps keep their smile healthy and strong. Cavities (tooth decay) can happen when teeth are not cleaned well. Cavities are caused by plaque (pronounced "plak"), a sticky layer of bacteria that builds on the teeth. When your child eats food, the bacteria in plaque make acids that can cause cavities.

Because baby teeth are smaller and more delicate, cavities can develop faster in them than in adult teeth. That's why it's important to eat healthy foods and limit sugar intake. For children, establishing healthy eating habits early will help them build strong habits going forward.



Healthy eating supports healthy teeth.
Here are some recommendations:

Eat:

- Fresh fruits
- Vegetables
- Cheese/Milk
- Yogurt
- Water
- Whole grains

Limit:

- Sticky candy
- Sugary drinks (limit to 4oz per day)
- Frequent snacking
- Using a bottle to sleep
- Juice
- Sweetened milk drinks

Recognizing Dental Pain

Some children may not be able to tell you that their tooth or mouth hurts. Changes in behavior, eating, sleeping, or their usual routine may be a sign that something is wrong. If you notice a new or unexplained change, consider whether dental pain could be contributing.

Possible signs of dental pain may include:

- Refusing to eat or changes in eating
- Chewing on only one side of the mouth
- Increased drooling
- Frequently touching or rubbing the face or mouth
- Changes in sleep
- Increased irritability or changes in behavior
- New or increased self-injurious behavior
- Swollen or bleeding gums
- Fever
- Swelling of the face, mouth, or gums

Don't assume a change in behavior is "just behavior." If something is new or unusual for your child, pain or another medical or dental issue may be contributing.

If you suspect dental pain, contact your child's dentist for guidance. Evaluate tooth pain that continues or worsens, especially if it's accompanied by facial swelling or fever.



let's talk



strategies & resources



Helping Your Child Feel Comfortable with Toothbrushing

Toothbrushing can be challenging for children with sensory differences. The feel of the toothbrush, taste or texture of toothpaste, sounds, smells, and the steps involved in brushing can all affect a child's comfort with the routine.

There is no one approach that works for every child. It may take time and experimentation to find the toothbrush, toothpaste, routine, and supports that work best for your child. Start where your child is comfortable, introduce new steps gradually, and build the routine at a pace that works for them.

The strategies in this section can help make toothbrushing more comfortable, predictable, and successful.



Choosing the Right Toothbrush

Finding a Toothbrush That Feels Right

There is no one toothbrush that works for every child. Size, shape, bristle texture, handle, and vibration can all affect how a toothbrush feels. Soft bristles are generally recommended for children. Some autistic children may prefer an extra-soft brush or a different texture, such as silicone.

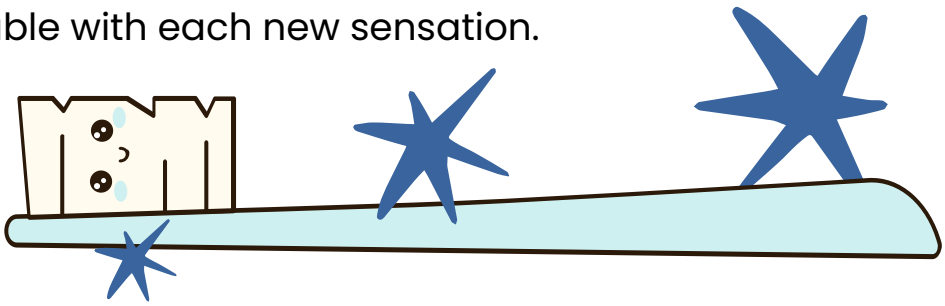
A smaller brush head can feel less overwhelming because it takes up less space in the mouth. Different handle sizes and shapes may also make the toothbrush easier to hold and control, whether your child brushes independently or needs assistance.

It may take some experimenting to find what feels comfortable for your child. If even touching a toothbrush is uncomfortable, you don't have to start with brushing. Begin by helping your child get used to the toothbrush and the sensations associated with it.

Start Slowly

For children who struggle with the sensation of bristles, a silicone brush may be a gentler way to explore a different texture. Gradually introduce the toothbrush. Your child might start by holding it, touching the bristles, bringing it to their lips, or briefly putting it in their mouth before working toward brushing.

Take it one step at a time. Your child may need time to become comfortable with each new sensation.



All About Toothbrushes



Silicone & Finger Brushes

Silicone toothbrushes have a different texture and may feel smoother than traditional nylon bristles. A silicone finger toothbrush fits over a finger and may provide more control when introducing toothbrushing or helping someone who has difficulty tolerating a traditional toothbrush. These options will not be right for everyone, so pay attention to the person's comfort and response.

Electric Toothbrushes



For sensory-seeking children, brushing their teeth can provide beneficial oral input and a calming effect. An electric toothbrush can also help children who are sensory-seeking. The consistent motion can feel easier to manage than manual brushing. Let your child explore the toothbrush with it turned off first, then gently introduce the vibration so they feel comfortable and know what to expect. Some people enjoy the consistent vibration and oral input provided by an electric toothbrush. For sensory-seeking individuals, the vibration may make brushing more comfortable or engaging.



For someone who is unsure about vibration, introduce an electric toothbrush gradually. Let them explore it while it is turned off first. Once they are comfortable with the toothbrush, the vibration can be introduced slowly.

Sensory Friendly Toothbrush Options:



Triple-Sided Toothbrushes

A triple-sided toothbrush has bristles positioned around multiple sides of the tooth. This allows the brush to reach several tooth surfaces at the same time. For someone who has difficulty tolerating longer periods of brushing, this style may make the brushing routine easier to manage.

U-Shaped Toothbrushes

U-shaped toothbrushes fit around multiple teeth at once. Some individuals may prefer the sensation or find the shape easier to tolerate. However, a different or easier-to-tolerate toothbrush still needs to clean the teeth effectively. If you are unsure whether a particular toothbrush is providing adequate cleaning, ask your dentist or dental hygienist.



Color & Design

Sometimes the simplest change helps. Allowing someone to choose their toothbrush can give them more control over the routine.

Consider:

- A favorite color
- A favorite character
- A handle they find comfortable
- A brush with lights or music
- Letting them choose between two or three toothbrush options

The goal is not to find the "perfect" toothbrush. The goal is to find a toothbrush that the person can tolerate and that effectively cleans their teeth.

Choosing the Right Toothpaste

When it comes to toothpaste, exploring different scents, textures, and scents will be important to help your child care for their teeth. Strong mint flavors can be overpowering for young children who are sensitive to taste. Try milder flavors, such as fruit, bubblegum, or even unflavored options. The most important thing is that your child will use it regularly. You may also need to experiment with a few options before your child finds one that feels right.

Flavorless

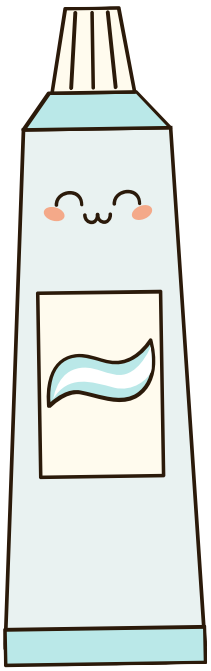
- Dr. Bob Unflavored Toothpaste
- Jack N' Jill Toothpaste

Alternative Flavors

- Tom's of Maine Kids Toothpaste
- hello Kids Toothpaste

Foam Free

- Boka Kids Toothpaste – Strawberry Mango
- hello Kids Natural Watermelon Toothpaste





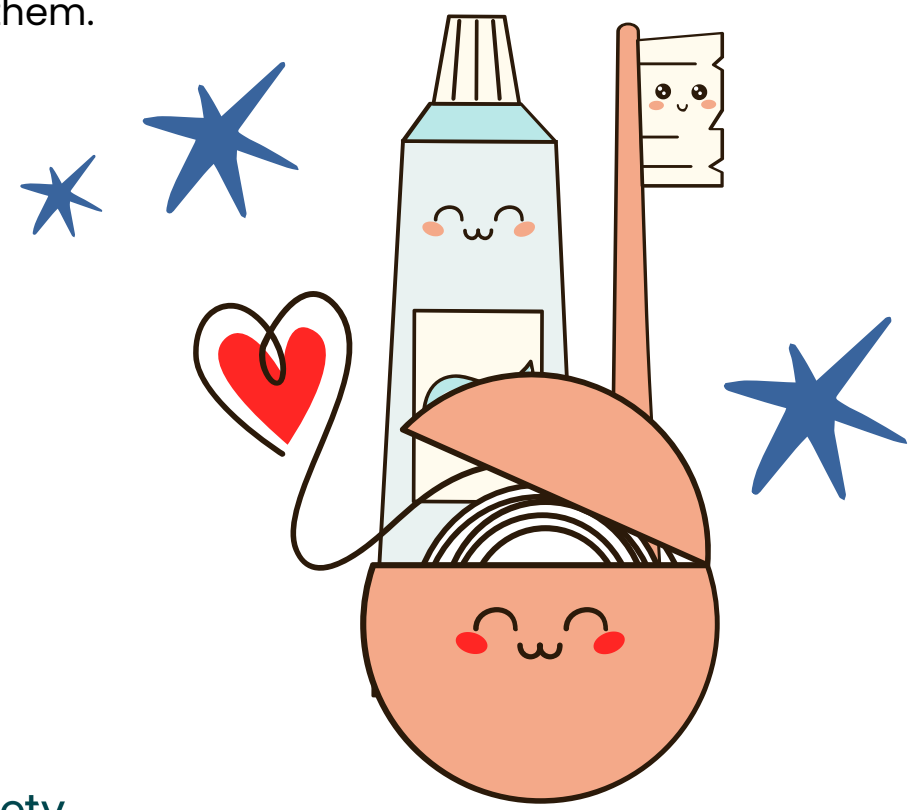
Source: SmileCalifornia.org

Getting Comfortable with Toothbrushing

Sometimes where and how toothbrushing happens can make a difference. You do not have to brush teeth standing at the bathroom sink. Try different positions, locations, or calming strategies to find what works best for your child.

Some children may be more comfortable:

- Sitting on a caregiver's lap
- Watching a favorite video while brushing
- Using deep pressure or other calming sensory strategies before brushing
- Brushing in another room where they feel more comfortable, such as the living room, bedroom, or kitchen
- It's okay to be flexible. The goal is to help your child become comfortable with toothbrushing and gradually build a routine that works for them.



Make Toothbrushing Predictable

Knowing what to expect can make toothbrushing easier. Using the same routine and supports each time can help your child understand what is happening and what comes next.

Try:

- Give advance notice. For example, "We are brushing teeth in five minutes."
- Use a visual timer so your child can see when it is almost time to brush or how long brushing will last.
- Use the same words or phrases each time to make the routine familiar.
- Follow the same order of steps whenever possible.
- Use a visual schedule with pictures showing each step of the toothbrushing routine.



Predictability doesn't mean the routine has to be rigid. Adjust the routine when needed based on your child's comfort and needs.



Use Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement can help make toothbrushing a more positive experience and encourage your child to keep building new skills. Celebrate small steps and progress, not just completing the entire routine. Use something your child enjoys as reinforcement. This might be verbal praise, bubbles, stickers, a favorite activity, dancing to a favorite song, or another preferred reward.

Helpful strategies:

- Reinforce right away and be specific. For example, “Great job trying a new toothpaste!”
- Choose something meaningful to your child. What motivates one child may not motivate another.
- Start small. Reinforce the step your child is currently working on.
- Build gradually. As one step becomes comfortable, work toward the next.
- Fade rewards over time. As the routine becomes more familiar, gradually reduce additional rewards while continuing praise and encouragement.

Try our “I Can Brush My Teeth” Toothbrushing Tracker! Your child can add a sticker each time they meet their toothbrushing goal, whether it’s holding the toothbrush, brushing for a few seconds, trying a new toothpaste, or completing the full routine. Start with an achievable goal and build from there.



Remember
to celebrate every step of progress, no matter how small, and don't be afraid to make changes to your routine as your child grows and their needs change.
The most important thing is finding a routine that works best for your child.

Autism Society
Inland Empire



I CAN BRUSH MY TEETH tracker

DAY			YAY! I DID IT!
SUN			
MON			
TUE			
WED			
THU			
FRI			
SAT			

GREAT JOB

I brush my teeth 2 times every day!

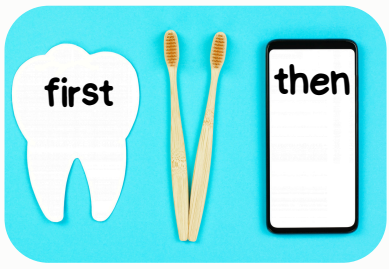
Visual Supports



Visual supports can help make toothbrushing easier to understand and more predictable. They can show your child what will happen, what comes next, and when the routine is finished.

Choose a visual support that works for your child. Some children respond well to pictures, while others prefer written words, a checklist, or a combination.







Examples of visual supports include:

- First/Then: “First brush teeth, then favorite video.”
- Picture schedule: Use pictures to show each step, such as get toothbrush → add toothpaste → brush → rinse → all done.
- Written checklist: For children who read, provide a simple list they can check off as they complete each step.
- Visual timer: Use a timer your child can see to show how much time is left.
- Toothbrushing tracker: Let your child add a sticker or checkmark to celebrate completing the toothbrushing goal they are working on.
- Modeling: Brush your teeth together or demonstrate each step so your child can see what to do.



Keep it simple. A visual schedule does not need to include every step at first. If your child is working on getting comfortable with toothbrushing, the visual might show only two or three steps. You can add more as your child becomes comfortable with the routine.



Looking for visual supports for toothbrushing?

Check out Pinterest, Teachers Pay Teachers, or search online for a visual support that works best for you or your family.

Brushing teeth made fun!



STEP 1

GET READY!
TOOTHBRUSH



GET SET!
TOOTHPASTE



STEP 2



STEP 3

GO!
BRUSH UP AND DOWN

ALL DONE!
RINSE YOUR MOUTH



STEP 4



Sparkle Smile SUPERSTAR!

let's go to the dentist



Scan to see the Autism Society Inland Empire "Autism Friendly" Dentists directory:



Preparing for a Dental Visit

A dental visit can include unfamiliar sights, sounds, smells, sensations, and people, which may feel overwhelming or uncomfortable for some children with Autism. Preparing ahead of time can help your child know what to expect and make the experience feel more familiar.

Talk with the dental office ahead of time. Let the dentist and staff know about your child's individual needs, preferences, and concerns. Ask what accommodations may be available, such as:

- Reduced lighting
- A quieter waiting area
- Sensory items including a weighted blanket or lap pad
- Additional time for the appointment
- Breaks during the visit
- Scheduling at a quieter time of day
- Allowing your child to bring a familiar or comforting item
- Ask the dental office if your child can visit before the actual appointment. The first visit might include walking into the office, meeting the staff, seeing the treatment room, or sitting in the dental chair without any dental work.

You know your child best. Share what helps your child feel comfortable, what may be difficult for them, how they communicate, and strategies that work well at home or during other appointments.

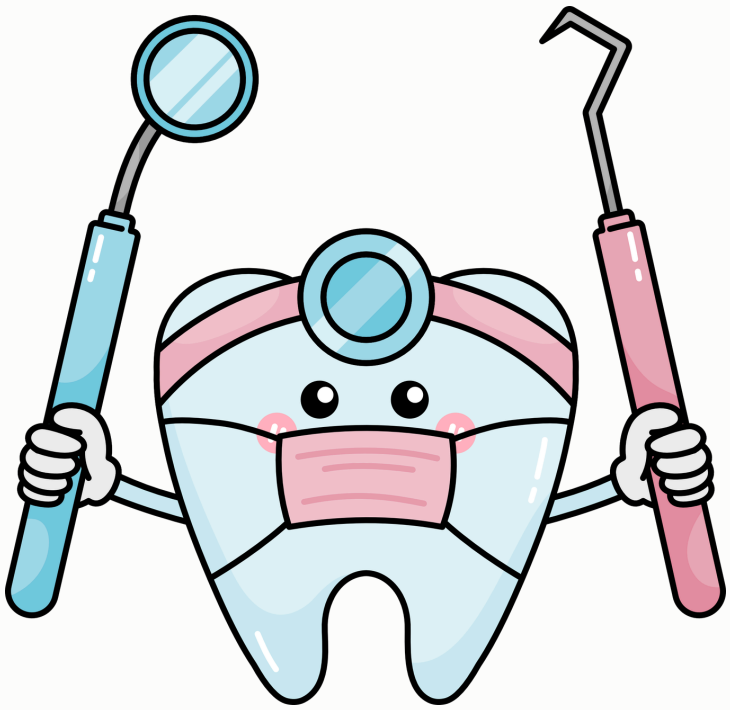
Use Visual Supports to Prepare for the Dental Visit

VIsual supports can help your child know where they are going and what to expect during a dental visit. Seeing the steps ahead of time can make the experience feel more familiar and predictable.

You might use:

- A visual schedule showing the steps of going to the dentist
- A social story about what happens during a dental visit
- Photos of the dental office from the dentist's website
- A calendar or countdown to show when the appointment is coming
- A First/Then visual, such as "First dentist, then favorite activity"

Keep the visual support realistic and simple. You do not need to show every possible thing that might happen. Focus on the main steps your child can expect and review them as often as your child finds helpful.

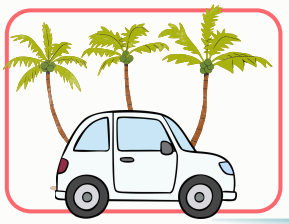


My Dentist Visit



I am going to the dentist. I will take deep breaths and try my best!

1

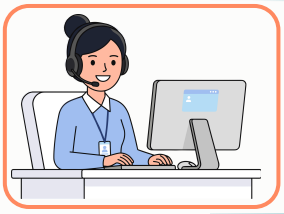


We will go to the dentist.
I will ride in the car and take deep breaths.



I am safe.

2



We will check in.
I will say hello and wait my turn



I can wait.

3



We meet the dentist.
I dentist will say hello and show my around.



I am okay.

4

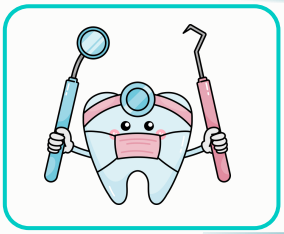


I sit in the chair
I will sit down.
The chair can move up and down or lay back.



I can do it.

5

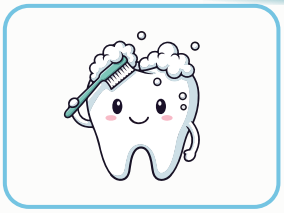


The dentist checks my teeth.
The dentist will look at my teeth with tools.
It might feel funny but it doesn't hurt.



I am strong

6



The teeth get cleaned.
The dentist will clean my teeth.



Clean teeth are happy teeth!

7



I did it!
I can pick a reward and we go home,



I am proud of myself!

Every visit helps keep my smile healthy!

Autism Society
Inland Empire

If You Need Extra Help

Specialized Dental Desensitization Services Through Regional Center

Inland Regional Center may provide access to specialized dental support services for eligible clients who experience significant challenges accessing dental care. These services focus on building familiarity and comfort with dental procedures through gradual exposure to dental tools, sounds, and routines in a familiar setting. By reducing anxiety and increasing tolerance, these services can help individuals successfully access preventive and routine dental care. Contact your Service Coordinator for information about a referral to the Dental Coordinator.

ABA Support

If your child receives Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) services, your ABA team may be able to help support oral hygiene goals as part of daily living and self-care skills. Examples may include:

- Building tolerance for toothbrushing through gradual desensitization.
- Using visual schedules, social stories, or step-by-step supports for oral care routines.
- Teaching brushing and flossing skills through modeling and practice.
- Increasing independence with daily hygiene routines.
- Preparing children for dental visits by practicing sitting still, opening their mouth, or becoming comfortable with dental tools.

Occupational Therapist Paid for By Medical Insurance

Because oral hygiene is considered a health and daily living skill rather than an educational skill, these services are typically addressed through medical occupational therapy funded by health insurance. School-based occupational therapy is generally limited to services necessary for a child to access and benefit from their education and may not address home-based activities such as toothbrushing, flossing, and participation in dental care. Families concerned about oral hygiene challenges should consider discussing these goals with their child's healthcare provider and medical occupational therapist.



Sedation

Sometimes sedation may be necessary to ensure proper dental care is delivered. For many, dental care may be a significant sensory challenge especially when they do not like their teeth touched or instruments in their mouth. Sedation dentistry is often used to make it easier for patients to undergo treatment. In this type of situation, please discuss with your dentist the different sedation options available for your child as needed. Oral sedation dentistry may be the best option if you know that your loved one may not tolerate being awake for dental procedures.

Great Resources to Explore!

For more information on oral sedation, general anesthesia and dentists:

- ieautism.org/dentists-and-dental-care-3
- healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/oral-health/Pages/Anesthesia-or-Sedation-for-Your-Childs-Dental-Work.aspx
- my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/22275-sedation-dentistry

Additional Resources

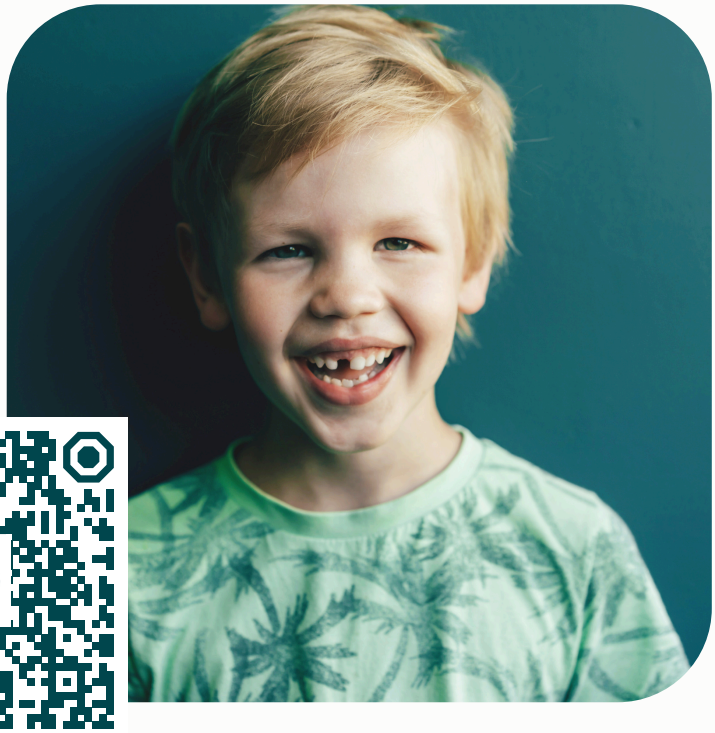
It's never too early to start building healthy oral habits. Starting strong dental habits at home helps children see oral health and dental care as part of their daily lives. By establishing a daily dental routine, making appropriate dietary choices, and preventive care through regular dental checkups, these habits can help reduce dental issues and promote a healthier lifestyle.

Resources for Parents

For more information on "Autism friendly" dentists, dental tips, Medi-Cal Dental services, and other resources, please visit the following:

- Autism Society Inland Empire "Autism Friendly" Dentists:
- ieautism.org/dentists-and-dental-care-3
- American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD): aapd.org
- American Dental Association (ADA): ada.org
- California Medi-Cal Dental: smilecalifornia.org
- ADA dental care: mouthhealthy.org

Scan to see the Autism Society Inland Empire "Autism Friendly" Dentists directory:



Autism Society Inland Empire

Autism Society
Inland Empire

ieautism.org

Your local Autism connection

ieautism.org
(951) 220-6922
info@ieautism.org



Little smiles, big care!