

### Getting Started at Home

Oral health is a very important component of healthy daily living. But for some children with autism, oral health habits can be challenging. Our hope is that this guide will provide information for families to help begin a lifetime of good oral care.

To get started, you and your child should pick out the right toothbrush. There are many colors, styles, and types available. It is important that the brush is the right size for your child's mouth and that it has soft bristles.

For some children with autism, brushing teeth can be difficult. The sensation can be uncomfortable at first, and the child may need to be desensitized. You may want to start by using the toothbrush to touch your child's lips or just inside the mouth. You may also want to teach your child to "open wide," so that this direction is understood. Showing your child how you brush your own teeth may also be helpful.



# Brushing and Flossing

## Brushing Your Child's Teeth

- Stand behind your child with their head on your chest.
- Put a pea size amount of toothpaste on the center of the brush.
- Guide the brush as if you were brushing your own teeth.
- There are six steps to brushing:
  1. Brush the outside, inside and tops of the bottom back teeth on one side of the mouth five times.
  2. Move up and brush the inside, outside and chewing surfaces of the top teeth five times.
  3. Brush the bottom front teeth outside and inside five times.
  4. Move to the opposite side and brush the bottom teeth outside and inside five times.
  5. Brush the top front teeth inside, outside, and chewing surfaces five times.
  6. Brush the opposite top back teeth inside, outside, and chewing surfaces five times.

Although most people brush their teeth in the bathroom, in order to accommodate your child and get them accustomed to brushing their teeth, you may want to do this on the couch or in another part of your home where they may feel more comfortable. The ultimate goal is for your child to brush their teeth as independently as possible.

## Flossing

Another important oral health skill that should be mastered is flossing. Just like brushing, this should be introduced as soon as possible in small steps, while building upon each success.

- The same technique is used in putting your child's head on your chest and flossing as you would your own teeth.
- Floss one tooth at a time.

Again, the goal is always for your child to achieve independence in this task.



## Other Tips

### Other Tips That May Be Helpful

- Some families find it useful to use a timer so that the individual with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can see when the task will be over.
- Some individuals with autism benefit from visual supports and schedules. A visual schedule can be created by taking photographs of the steps outlined on the previous page.
  - Families can then print the pictures and create visual schedules for their child. Some families may print the page and check off the activities as they occur. The pages can be laminated and a dry erase marker can be used to check off each activity, this way the page can be reused.
  - Others may cut out the photos and laminate them, and place Velcro on the back of each photo. The photos are arranged in chronological order on a board, and as each step is completed, the corresponding picture is removed.
- Another option is to photograph each step of the teeth brushing process, load the pictures on to a digital picture frame and program it so that each photo is displayed for 10 second intervals. This can be used in the bathroom as they are brushing their teeth so that they have a visual prompt when it is time to move on to the next step.\*
- Some individuals need to be reinforced with verbal praise or a reward after each step. Others may be able to complete some, many, or all of the steps before verbal praise or a treat is needed. Each child will need to work at their own pace to achieve the skills necessary to brush their teeth.

Once a manual toothbrush has been mastered, then a power brush can be introduced. The power brush is slightly different in that the brush does the work, so the individual no longer needs to do the “brushing.”

In all cases, the ultimate goal is for the individual with autism to brush their teeth as independently as possible.

\*This type of visual support was developed by Gloria Satriale, Executive Director of PAAL (Preparing Adolescents for Adult Life).

