

Helping Kids with Autism Have Healthy Smiles

April is National Autism Awareness Month, and here at Delta Dental of Illinois, we've been talking a lot lately about the challenges that people with autism face when it comes to oral care and how to overcome them.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects people differently, and there is no "typical" profile of autism. Some children with autism may not experience problems with dental check-ups, but for others, especially those who are sensitive to light, sound or touch, routine dental visits can be particularly challenging. Maintaining good oral health habits such as brushing and flossing can also be difficult as brushing may feel intrusive and uncomfortable to children with autism.

Thankfully, many organizations, both here in Illinois and nationally, are working to make dental visits and good oral health more achievable for people with autism. If you have a child, friend or family member with autism, take a look at the following tips and resources.

Tips:

If your child has autism and is uncomfortable with dental visits, here are a few tips for making dental visits less stressful:

- [Find a dentist office that has experience in working with people with autism.](#) Do some research online to see if you can find information about such dentists in your area (see the directory below). Call ahead to talk to the dentist before your first visit to make sure that the dentist is prepared to handle your loved one's needs.
- [Have a "practice dental visit" at home,](#) especially if this is a child's first dental visit, or the first in a while. Talk through and act out the steps of a dental cleaning, such as counting and cleaning teeth.
- [Share pictures of the dentist's office,](#) dentist and staff to familiarize your child with the place and people they will see when they go in for an appointment. You will likely be able to find these online.
- [Plan the time around the dental visit](#) if possible so that your child will not be dealing with other new and stressful experiences immediately before or after.

Dental resources for those with autism:

There are many valuable digital resources to help kids with autism and their families address oral health care challenges. A few we recommend include:

- [Autism Speaks' Dental Tool Kit:](#) This page from the autism science and advocacy organization Autism Speaks includes a video on helping kids with autism learn to brush and floss, a guide on how to prepare for a dental visit and links to interactive kids' books about oral health.
- [Rush University Medical Center's list of autism and special needs-friendly dentists:](#) This directory includes a number of dentists and dental offices that specialize in caring for children, teens and in some cases adults with special needs in Cook, DuPage, Will and Winnebago counties. If you're a Delta Dental of Illinois member, consider using our [Provider Search](#) to determine which of these recommended dentists are in our network.
- [National Museum of Dentistry "Healthy Smiles for Autism" document:](#) This guide includes social story illustrations parents can use to show children with autism what will happen during a dental visit or a home oral care routine, and in what order so they know what to expect.
- [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's dental care tips for children with autism:](#) This list of advice includes information on how to set an oral care routine and how to prepare a child with autism for a dentist visit.

Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation Supports Giant Steps' Work For People with Autism

At Delta Dental of Illinois, our interest in helping those with autism have better oral health experiences extends far beyond Autism Awareness Month. In fact, through the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation's Community Grants Program,



the [Foundation has supported the Giant Steps program](#) in Lisle, IL, an organization that focuses on providing excellent educational and therapeutic services for children, teens and adults living with ASD, as well as autism training and outreach services for the greater community.

Giant Steps offers training to dental professionals who work or want to work with individuals with autism, and also works directly with those with autism. As one part of the program, Giant Steps takes people with autism to visit dental offices before they need to go for appointments, giving them a chance to become comfortable with the people and the environment before they actually need to sit through a dental cleaning and exam.

To learn more about Giant Steps, and how the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation community grant impacted the organization's work, read our blog post, [2014 Community Grant Spotlight: Giant Steps](#). Then, don't forget to dive deeper into the helpful autism tips and resources above!