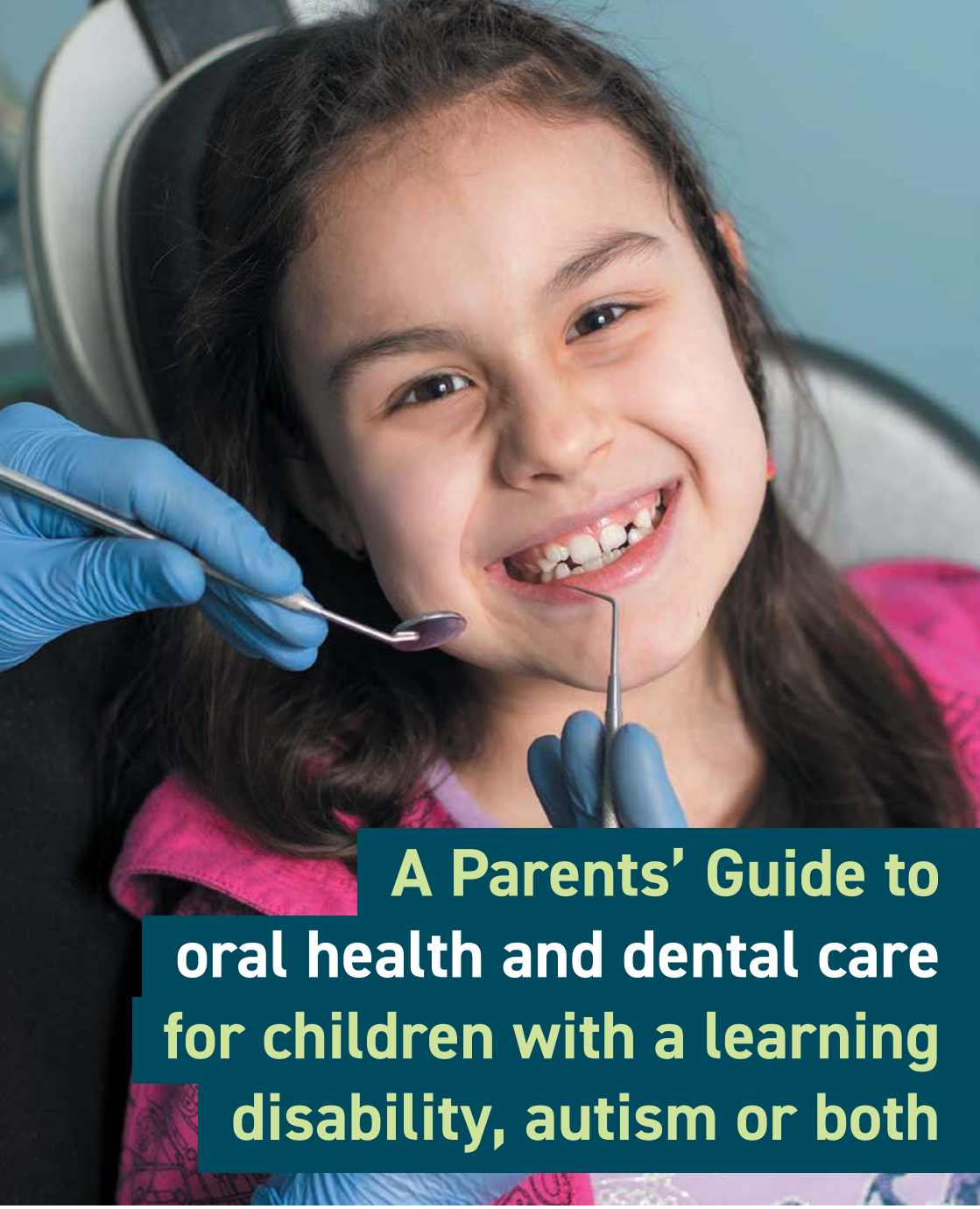

A Parents' Guide to oral health and dental care for children with a learning disability, autism or both

contact *For families with disabled children*

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

National Deaf Children's Society

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Acknowledgements

This guide has been co-produced with a group of parent carers. They wanted their experiences, both good and bad, to shape this guide so others like them can feel more confident about supporting their children with oral health and dental care. We have also included quotes from parent carers in this guide.

We would also like to thank the British Society of Paediatric Dentistry (BSPD) for allowing us to use content from their resource called *Advice for parents of children with autism.*

By parent or parent carer, we mean anyone with parental responsibility for children or young people with a learning disability, autism or both.

Introduction

Getting the best health care for your child is very important to everyone. Identifying health problems and treating them early enables children to continue to lead fulfilling lives.

The NHS Long Term Plan aims to improve children's health by making sure they get the right health checks at the right time.

This guide is one of a series of three to give parents information about **dental, hearing and eye checks**.

The guides will explain

- Why dental, hearing and eye checks are important
- How the checks are done
- How to access dental, hearing and eye checks
- How you can prepare and support your child
- How to find out more

This guide is about oral health and dental checks.

This guide has been produced in partnership with The National Deaf Children's Society **www.ndcs.org.uk** and SeeAbility **www.seeability.org.uk**

To find out more about NHS plans to improve services for children with learning disabilities, autism or both, visit **www.longtermplan.nhs.uk**

Why are dental checks and a healthy mouth important for my child?

A healthy mouth is important for overall health and wellbeing. Good oral hygiene can affect your child's ability to eat, sleep, talk, and play. It's also important for how they feel about themselves. Tooth decay and gum disease are the most common UK dental problems, but are mostly preventable.

A healthy mouth reduces the risk of chronic conditions such as diabetes. Reducing germs in the mouth also reduces lung infections such as pneumonia.

As soon as your child gets their first tooth, or before their first birthday, you should arrange their first check-up with a dentist. There are dentists who have experience of helping children with learning disabilities and autism so ask what experience they have. A law called the Equality Act 2010 says people like dentists must make reasonable adjustments so patients with learning disabilities and who are autistic can use their service.

People with learning disabilities have higher levels of untreated tooth decay

What do I need to know about keeping my child's teeth healthy?

Caring for your child's teeth can be tough at the best of times. For children with a learning disability, autism or both, there may be extra challenges such as sensory issues around having their teeth brushed, or the texture of toothpaste. Others will be unable to describe tooth pain. This can put extra pressure on you as parents. Be kind to yourself, but don't give up, as brushing your child's teeth at home is really important. Ideally, tooth brushing should start as soon as the first tooth comes through so that it becomes part of their daily routine.

Brush teeth **twice a day**

Use a fluoride toothpaste

After brushing, **spit** don't **rinse**

"The Dr Barman's toothbrush is a miracle! The toothbrush helps my son be more independent when he's cleaning his teeth as it's his special brush."

How should I clean my child's teeth?

All children need help with tooth brushing until the age of seven. Your child may need help for longer than this. Stand or sit behind and above your child, so that you can see where you are brushing and so you can support your child's head. Ideally, brush twice per day – before bed is most important.

Manual toothbrushes used correctly are just as good as electric ones. Use a smear of toothpaste (at least 1000ppm fluoride) until they are three. Then increase to a pea-sized blob (1000ppm and 1500ppm fluoride).

If your child doesn't like the taste and texture of toothpaste, there are flavourless or low foaming brands available but use one with the right amount of fluoride. If you are struggling, try brushing the teeth with water first, then rinse the brush and dab some toothpaste around the teeth.

Top 3 actions for preventing tooth decay

1. **Reduce the amount of foods and drinks that contain sugars**
2. **Brush teeth twice daily with flouride toothpaste**
3. **Take your child to the dentist when the first tooth appears**

What do I need to know about tooth decay?

Tooth plaque is a sticky layer of germs which coats the teeth. When plaque reacts with sugar, it produces acid. This causes decay or 'cavities' in the teeth. Choosing foods and drinks which are low in sugar may be challenging, especially if your child has a limited diet. Some medications contain sugar. Do ask for sugar-free alternatives.

Tooth decay is almost always preventable. Schools can help, and some dentists may visit your child's school to do checks. Speak to the occupational therapist (OT), who can provide visual charts as well as practical tips with tooth brushing.

Some children may be unable to describe tooth pain. Signs to look out for are eating on one side of the mouth only, pulling at the mouth, unexplained changes in behaviour, or emotional outbursts.

Sometimes these symptoms can be overlooked by health professionals and attributed to someone's disability, rather than investigated or treated. This is called diagnostic overshadowing. That's why it's so important to get regular dental checks with a dentist with experience of learning disabilities and autism.

What do I need to know about finding a dentist?

All children get free dental care from the NHS.
To find information about dentists in your area, search **www.nhs.uk/dentists**

If you think your child might need urgent treatment and you have a dentist, you should contact your dentist on the usual number. You can also call the NHS non-emergency number on 111.

Community Dental Service

Paediatric dentistry for children (aged 0-16) and community dental services provide specialist oral healthcare to patients whose needs cannot be managed by their general dental practice. Some accept a self-referral; others only accept a referral from another health care professional such as your GP. For patients that cannot be seen in the community, they may be able to access specialist care in a hospital.

"The Community Dental Service has been superb for my son. He gets additional time allocated for appointments, he can investigate the equipment, ask questions. Everything is explained to him. He sees the hygienist there who is brilliant with him and is going to teach him how to floss his teeth himself."

How can I prepare for a visit to the dentist?

Your child may not understand why they need to attend the appointment, may struggle in the waiting areas, and you may find it difficult to persuade them to go into the dentist's room for a check up. Celebrate the small steps as it may take longer for children with a learning disability, autism or both to understand what is happening and why.

There are some simple things you can ask your dentist to do to make the visit easier. These are called reasonable adjustments.

- ✔ **Ask for a quick "hello" visit before the appointment**
- ✔ **Try to get an appointment at the start of clinics, so there is less waiting**
- ✔ **Explain to the dentist what might stress your child or trigger behaviour**

"It took us four appointments, spaced over every 3 months for my son to enter the dentist's room. I asked for the preventative varnish to be applied - this acts as a sealant to stop tooth decay."

What happens if my child needs dental treatment?

If your child needs treatment, there are usually a number of options. Speak to your dentist and together you can agree what will work best for your child.

If your child is likely to become extremely distressed during treatment, you may want to ask your dentist about sedatives. Some children will require treatment under general anaesthesia (whilst they are asleep). The advantage of this is that all the treatment can be completed at one time.

Most parents recommend telling your child about the treatment as early as possible. You can try using symbols and storyboards (Widgit symbols or social stories, for example) to help prepare your child.

"We tell her exactly what treatment she is having. Her dentist explains the procedure step by step before doing it and is honest with her. She's even managed to get her to use toothpaste. I think having a dentist who understands is key."

Where can I find out about products that can help?

Fledglings is Contact's not-for-profit shop that helps families with disabled children by supplying products and equipment to help with their everyday challenges. They strive to source the best products for families including a range of oral health and chewing products.

Here are some products that parents recommend:

Dr Barman's Superbrush's Multi-Angled Toothbrush head allows the sides and tops of teeth to be brushed at the same time and means fewer brushes are needed to clean your child's teeth effectively.

From a sensory and self-regulating point of view, the chew buddy stick men are very popular.

Find these products and more at **www.fledglings.org.uk**

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We support families with the best possible guidance and information.

We bring families together to support each other.

We help families to campaign, volunteer and fundraise to improve life for themselves and others.

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