

The management of patients with autism in pediatric dental clinics: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition associated with significant behavioral changes. This condition, characterized by a heterogeneous range of symptoms, presents challenges in the context of pediatric dental care. The urgent need for a

specialized approach in this scenario demands the presence of trained and specialized oral health professionals, able to employ effective methods to provide appropriate treatments to individuals with ASD. In view of these considerations, the objective of this study is to address the treatment of autistic patients in pediatric dental clinics. Given the nature of the disorder, which can compromise social interaction and, consequently, adversely influence the dental care process, the implementation of these techniques is crucial for the efficacy and efficiency of treatment. The substantial impact of the behavioral disorders inherent to ASD on the patient's social dynamics makes it imperative to adopt approaches that minimize anxiety and promote an environment conducive to collaboration between the professional and the child patient. Thus, it is intended not only to contribute to the specialized literature on the subject, but also to provide practical subsidies that allow a tangible improvement in the quality of care provided to this specific portion of the pediatric population.

Keywords: Pediatric dentistry, Autism, Management, Behavior.

1 INTRODUCTION

Pediatric dental care for autistic patients represents a unique challenge in dental practice, requiring a specialized and sensitive approach to ensure effective and comfortable care for these children. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurobiological condition that impacts communication, social interaction, and behavior, making it essential to adapt conventional dental care strategies (EL ASHIRY, 2020; COMO *et al.*, 2021). In this context, an in-depth understanding of the individual characteristics of each autistic child and the application of specific techniques are crucial to establish a relationship of trust between the dental professional and the patient, promoting a safe and welcoming environment (HERRERA-MONCADA *et al.*, 2019; YOST *et al.*, 2019).

One of the main challenges when dealing with autistic patients in the dental office is the sensory hypersensitivity common to many children with ASD. The lighting, sounds, and textures present in the dental environment can trigger aversive responses, generating anxiety and resistance to treatment



(WALLIS *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, strategies that aim to minimize sensory stimuli, such as the use of soft lighting and the gradual introduction of dental instruments, become indispensable to create a more pleasant and receptive environment (DUKER *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, collaboration between the dental team, parents, and, when possible, health professionals who specialize in autism, is crucial for successful care (COMO *et al.*, 2021). Gathering detailed information about each autistic child's specific preferences, needs, and challenges contributes significantly to the planning of personalized strategies, promoting a holistic and patient-centered approach. This multidisciplinary collaboration not only improves the effectiveness of care, but also reinforces the importance of an integrated approach in oral health promotion in children with ASD (COMO *et al.*, 2021; TRAN *et al.*, 2021).

The aim of this study is to provide information for pediatric dental professionals, highlighting the importance of empathetic understanding and adaptation of techniques to promote an inclusive and quality care environment for autistic children.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study consists of a review of the literature, focusing on the care of autistic patients in pediatric dental clinics. For data collection, a bibliographic search was carried out covering scientific articles in the LILACS, Pubmed and SCIELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online) databases. The keywords "Autism", "Pediatric Dentistry" and "Management" were used.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 AUTISM CONCEPT

Autism, also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a complex neurobiological condition that affects neurological development, manifesting itself through peculiar patterns of behavior, communication, and social interaction (PI *et al.*, 2020; GANDHI *et al.*, 2021). It is characterized by the presence of challenges in verbal and non-verbal communication, restricted interests, as well as repetitive behaviors. The autism spectrum encompasses a diversity of clinical presentations, ranging from milder forms to more severe conditions, which reinforces the importance of an individualized approach when dealing with autistic patients in the pediatric dental clinic (PI *et al.*, 2020; VALLOGINI *et al.*, 2022).

3.2 DIAGNOSIS OF AUTISM

The diagnosis of autism is complex and usually performed by a multidisciplinary team, including health professionals, psychologists, and educators. The diagnostic criteria, as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), consider the presence of deficits in



social communication and repetitive behaviors, and comprehensive assessment of the child's development is essential. Early diagnosis is critical for initiating appropriate interventions and support, including specific strategies for the pediatric dental setting (OCANTO *et al.*, 2020; HASELL *et al.*, 2022).

3.3 PATIENT CARE

Pediatric dental care for autistic patients requires a specialized and sensitive approach. The creation of a welcoming and adapted environment, considering the sensory particularities of patients, is essential (HASELL *et al.*, 2022). Playful strategies, visual communication, and the gradual introduction of dental instruments are techniques often employed to promote patient collaboration (ZERMAN *et al.*, 2022). In addition, close collaboration with parents and caregivers, as well as training the dental team in autism-specific behavioral management techniques, are crucial aspects of successful care. The individualization of care, combined with a deep understanding of the patient's needs, constitutes the basis for the effective and compassionate management of the autistic patient in the pediatric dental clinic (ZERMAN *et al.*, 2022; GOYAL *et al.*, 2023).

3.4 PATIENT MANAGEMENT

The management of the autistic patient in the pediatric dental clinic requires a careful and adaptive approach to ensure a positive and effective experience. Creating a welcoming and friendly environment, paying attention to the patient's sensory peculiarities, is essential (SAWICKI *et al.*, 2023). Personalized strategies, such as the use of visual communication, the establishment of clear routines, and the gradual introduction of dental instruments, are often employed to minimize anxiety and promote cooperation. Close collaboration with parents and caregivers plays a key role, providing valuable insights into patient-specific preferences and challenges (MUMMOLO *et al.*, 2020). In addition, training the dental team in specific behavioral management techniques for autism is crucial, contributing to building a relationship of trust between the professional and the autistic patient. A focus on individualization of care and an empathetic understanding of patient needs are key elements to ensure effective and respectful care in the pediatric dental clinic (Preda *et al.*, 2022; SAWICKI *et al.*, 2023).

4 CONCLUSION

The treatment of patients with ASD requires a specialized approach, and it is imperative that the professional is properly trained to establish a relationship of trust with both the patient and the caregiver. Several strategies can be adopted during care, such as the use of TV programs, dialogue, visual resources, educational videos, and the behavioral management techniques of pediatric dentistry.



These approaches aim to facilitate interaction and treatment for children with ASD, promoting a more positive experience. Finally, we emphasize the importance of the constant willingness of the dentist to update himself and seek specific information for dental care in children with ASD, thus ensuring the performance of successful and trauma-free procedures.



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