

Abstract

Background: Autistic children are one of the special needs children groups who demand special care from their caregivers/ parents. Usually, caregivers/ parents play an important role in health-related matters affecting their children.

Objectives: To assess the knowledge, attitudes and practices of caregivers/ parents and teachers on oral health care of autistic children. Additionally to determine the associated factors that impact knowledge, attitudes and practices of oral health care among caregivers/ parents and teachers of autistic children in Randburg Clinic School in Johannesburg.

Methods: A total of 71 caregivers/ parents and 16 teachers participated in the study. A cross-sectional analytical study was conducted among caregivers/ parents and teachers of children with autistic disorder in Randburg Clinic School. Data on caregivers/ parents' and teacher's knowledge, attitude and practice of oral health was collected using a modified self-administered questionnaire, and formulated in simple English. The questionnaires consisted of demographic questions and also questions to assess the caregivers/ parents and teacher's knowledge, attitude and practice on oral health, child's oral hygiene practices and visits to their dentist among other issues.

Results: All obtained data was captured in Microsoft Excel and then imported into Stata version 15.2 for analysis. A total of 57.7 % of the participants were between the ages of 31-40 years and the majority of them 85.5% were females. A total of 57.75% of caregivers/ parents indicated that the health of the mouth and teeth does not affect the overall health of the child. This is despite 60.56% of caregivers/ parents indicating that they have been taught/ informed about oral health care. A total of 59.15% of caregivers/ parents indicated that it was important to look after their children's baby teeth, however, 47.89% of caregivers/ parents indicated that they would rather have their children's teeth taken out as a form of preferred treatment. A total of 45.07 caregivers/ parents took the children to a dentist when there is an oral disease complaint. More than 60% of the caregivers/ parents indicated that their children brush their teeth twice a day in the morning and at night.

A total of 43.75% of teachers indicated that dental cavities were mainly caused by bacteria in the mouth and 31.25% indicated that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) children should have their first dental visit only in the event of pain. A total of 87.5% of teachers indicated that they have never referred a child with ASD to a dental clinic and 68.75% of them had never done a simple examination of the teeth of children with ASD.

Conclusion: While the attitude and practice of oral health care seemed adequate among caregivers/ parents, knowledge of both caregivers/ parents and teachers toward oral health was noted to be inadequate.