

**PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY AND JAW CORRECTION IN CHILDREN WITH  
DOWN SYNDROME: PATHOPHYSIOLOGY, CLINICAL CHALLENGES, AND  
MODERN THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES**

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**ARTICLE  
INFORMATION**

**ABSTRACT:**

**ARTICLE HISTORY:**

Received:06.06.2026

Revised: 07.06.2026

Accepted:08.06.2026

**KEYWORDS:**

Down syndrome;  
pediatric dentistry;  
malocclusion;  
craniofacial  
abnormalities;  
maxillary hypoplasia;  
orthodontic treatment;  
jaw dysfunction;  
hypodontia; delayed  
tooth eruption;  
periodontal disease;  
orofacial dysfunction;  
early intervention;  
functional therapy;  
multidisciplinary  
approach

*Children with Down syndrome (DS), caused by trisomy 21, present with a distinct spectrum of craniofacial and oral abnormalities that significantly affect dental development and maxillofacial function. Congenital dysfunction of the jaws, delayed tooth eruption, hypodontia, and malocclusion are highly prevalent and often require early and multidisciplinary intervention. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the etiology, clinical manifestations, and current evidence-based approaches to dental and orthodontic management in this population. Emphasis is placed on early intervention, functional rehabilitation, and the integration of preventive and therapeutic strategies aimed at improving long-term oral health outcomes and quality of life.*

**1. Introduction**

Down syndrome is one of the most common chromosomal abnormalities worldwide, with an incidence of approximately 1 in 700 live births. Beyond systemic and cognitive features,

individuals with DS exhibit characteristic craniofacial morphology that predisposes them to complex dental and orthodontic issues.

The midfacial hypoplasia, reduced maxillary growth, and altered neuromuscular tone create a functional imbalance in the stomatognathic system. These changes are not merely structural but also functional, affecting breathing, swallowing, speech, and mastication.

Despite the high prevalence of dental anomalies, access to specialized dental care remains limited, and early intervention is often delayed. This highlights the need for a more structured and proactive clinical approach.

## **2. Craniofacial and Developmental Characteristics**

### **2.1 Skeletal Features**

Children with DS typically exhibit:

- Maxillary hypoplasia (underdevelopment of the upper jaw)
- Relative mandibular prognathism
- Reduced cranial base length
- Flattened facial profile

These skeletal discrepancies contribute significantly to malocclusion patterns, particularly Class III relationships.

### **2.2 Soft Tissue and Functional Factors**

- Generalized muscular hypotonia
- Relative macroglossia (large tongue in a small oral cavity)
- Mouth breathing due to airway obstruction
- Tongue protrusion and poor oral seal

These factors disrupt normal oro-facial development and exacerbate dental irregularities.

### **2.3 Dental Development**

Dental maturation is often delayed by 1–2 years compared to typically developing children.

Observed features include:

- Delayed eruption of primary and permanent teeth
- Altered tooth morphology (microdontia, conical teeth)
- Enamel hypoplasia
- Shortened roots

## **3. Major Dental and Orthodontic Conditions**

### **3.1 Malocclusion**

Malocclusion is one of the most prominent findings in children with DS, with prevalence rates exceeding 70–80%.

Common patterns include:

- Class III malocclusion (due to maxillary deficiency)
- Anterior open bite
- Posterior crossbite
- Crowding or spacing abnormalities

The etiology is multifactorial, involving skeletal, muscular, and functional components.

### **3.2 Hypodontia and Oligodontia**

Congenital absence of teeth is significantly more common in DS:

- Prevalence: up to 50–60%
- Most commonly missing:

-Lateral incisors

-Second premolars

This contributes to occlusal instability and aesthetic concerns.

### **3.3 Periodontal Disease**

Interestingly, children with DS often have:

- Lower caries rates
- Higher susceptibility to periodontal disease

This paradox is attributed to:

- Immune dysfunction
- Altered inflammatory response
- Poor oral hygiene due to motor limitations

Early-onset periodontitis is a major concern and can lead to premature tooth loss.

### **3.4 Functional Disorders**

- Impaired mastication
- Swallowing dysfunction (atypical swallowing)
- Speech articulation problems

These issues are closely linked to both structural anomalies and neuromuscular deficits.

## **4. Pathophysiology of Jaw Dysfunction**

Jaw dysfunction in DS is not solely anatomical; it is deeply rooted in neuromuscular imbalance:

- Hypotonia reduces functional stimulation of bone growth
- Abnormal tongue posture alters dental arch development
- Chronic mouth breathing affects maxillary expansion

The lack of proper functional loading leads to underdevelopment of the maxilla and progressive worsening of malocclusion.

## **5. Modern Therapeutic Approaches**

### **5.1 Early Orthodontic Intervention**

Early treatment (ages 3–6) is critical.

#### **Palatal Plate Therapy (Castillo-Morales approach)**

- Stimulates orofacial muscles
- Improves tongue positioning
- Enhances lip closure

Clinical studies show improvements in:

- Feeding

- Speech development
- Facial muscle tone

### **5.2 Functional Orthodontics**

- Removable appliances
- Functional trainers
- Expansion devices

Goals:

- Stimulate maxillary growth
- Improve occlusal relationships
- Normalize oral function

### **5.3 Fixed Orthodontic Treatment**

In adolescence:

- Braces may be used cautiously
- Requires strong cooperation and caregiver support

Challenges:

- Oral hygiene maintenance
- Increased risk of periodontal complications

### **5.4 Preventive Dentistry**

A cornerstone of management:

- Regular dental check-ups (every 3–6 months)
- Fluoride therapy
- Professional cleaning
- Parental education

Preventive strategies significantly reduce long-term complications.

### **5.5 Multidisciplinary Approach**

Optimal care requires collaboration between:

- Pediatric dentists
- Orthodontists
- Speech therapists
- Neurologists
- Psychologists

This integrated model addresses both functional and structural needs.

### **6. Clinical Challenges**

- Limited patient cooperation
- Communication difficulties
- Increased medical comorbidities
- Lack of specialized training among dentists

These barriers often result in delayed or inadequate treatment.

### **7. Discussion**

The dental and craniofacial manifestations observed in children with Down syndrome represent a complex interaction between genetic, developmental, and functional factors. Unlike isolated orthodontic anomalies seen in the general pediatric population, the abnormalities in this group are systemic in nature and evolve dynamically over time.

One of the central issues highlighted in the literature is the role of **midfacial hypoplasia** combined with **neuromuscular hypotonia**. These two factors create a persistent imbalance between form and function. The underdevelopment of the maxilla restricts the available space within the oral cavity, while the relatively large and hypotonic tongue contributes to altered pressure patterns on the dental arches. This imbalance promotes the development of anterior open bite, posterior crossbite, and Class III malocclusion, which are consistently reported as dominant patterns in this population.

Importantly, these structural deviations are not self-limiting. In fact, without intervention, they tend to worsen due to the lack of adequate functional stimulation necessary for normal craniofacial growth. This supports the growing consensus that **early functional intervention is not optional but essential**.

Another key finding is the high prevalence of **hypodontia and delayed tooth eruption**, which further complicate occlusal development. Missing teeth reduce arch integrity and contribute to spacing issues, while delayed eruption disrupts the timing of orthodontic treatment. This creates a narrower therapeutic window and requires clinicians to adopt flexible and individualized treatment plans rather than standardized protocols.

From a periodontal perspective, children with Down syndrome present a unique paradox: relatively low caries incidence but significantly increased susceptibility to periodontal disease. This phenomenon has been attributed to immunological alterations, including impaired neutrophil function and dysregulated inflammatory responses. As a result, even mild plaque accumulation can lead to rapid periodontal breakdown. Therefore, preventive care must be more intensive and frequent compared to typically developing children.

The discussion of therapeutic strategies emphasizes the importance of **early orthopedic and functional appliances**, particularly palatal plates based on the Castillo-Morales concept. These devices not only influence skeletal growth but also target neuromuscular re-education. Studies have demonstrated improvements in tongue posture, lip competence, and overall orofacial function, which in turn positively affect craniofacial development. However, the success of such interventions depends heavily on early initiation (ideally before 6 years of age) and consistent use.

Despite the availability of effective treatment modalities, several barriers limit their implementation. These include:

- reduced patient cooperation due to cognitive and behavioral factors
- insufficient training of dental professionals in managing special needs patients
- limited access to specialized care in many regions
- lack of awareness among parents regarding the importance of early dental intervention

Furthermore, conventional orthodontic approaches may not always be suitable for this population. Fixed appliances, for example, pose challenges in maintaining oral hygiene and may increase the risk of periodontal complications. Therefore, treatment plans must be simplified, adaptable, and focused on functional improvement rather than purely aesthetic outcomes.

Another critical aspect is the necessity of a **multidisciplinary approach**. The interaction between dental structures, speech, breathing, and neuromuscular control means that isolated dental treatment is insufficient. Collaboration between orthodontists, pediatric dentists, speech therapists, and neurologists significantly enhances treatment outcomes.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in integrating **preventive, functional, and behavioral strategies** into a unified care model. This reflects a shift from reactive treatment toward proactive and personalized healthcare. Such an approach aligns with modern concepts of patient-centered care and long-term quality of life improvement.

### 8. Conclusion

Children with Down syndrome exhibit a distinct and multifactorial pattern of dental and craniofacial abnormalities that require specialized and timely management. Congenital jaw dysfunction, combined with delayed dental development and neuromuscular imbalance, creates a high risk for severe malocclusion and functional impairment.

The evidence clearly indicates that **early diagnosis and intervention are critical determinants of treatment success**. Functional therapies initiated during early childhood can positively influence craniofacial growth, improve oral functions such as swallowing and speech, and reduce the severity of future orthodontic problems.

Preventive dentistry plays an equally vital role. Given the increased susceptibility to periodontal disease, regular monitoring, professional care, and parental involvement are essential components of long-term oral health maintenance.

Importantly, treatment goals in this population should extend beyond aesthetic correction. The primary focus must be on:

- improving oral function
- supporting normal growth and development
- enhancing overall quality of life

The complexity of these cases necessitates a **multidisciplinary and individualized approach**, integrating medical, dental, and psychosocial care. Future research should aim to develop standardized clinical protocols and improve access to specialized services, particularly in underserved regions.

Ultimately, advancing dental care for children with Down syndrome is not only a matter of clinical practice but also a reflection of inclusive and equitable healthcare systems.

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