

Delta Dental of Illinois National Children's Dental Health Month Op-ed

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February is Children's Dental Health Month

February is National Children's Dental Health Month and this year's theme, "For a Sparkly Smile, Remember to Brush and Floss Every Day," reminds children and their caregivers that good oral health habits help create a lifetime of healthy smiles.

In Illinois, tooth decay is the most common chronic disease affecting children.¹ According to a survey by the Illinois Department of Public Health, 55 percent of Illinois third graders have experienced dental cavities. Among those children, 30 percent have untreated cavities and 4 percent have cavities that need urgent dental treatment.²

Since most tooth decay is preventable, it is important to start educating children about good oral health habits at an early age. National Children's Dental Health Month is the perfect time to do just that.

Throughout the month, numerous events and activities in Illinois will promote positive oral health practices. Thousands of kindergarten through third-grade students in elementary schools throughout Illinois will enjoy "Land of Smiles," an entertaining oral health education program that teaches proper brushing and flossing techniques, good and bad foods for the teeth and why it is important to visit the dentist at least twice a year. As part of our mission to improve the oral health of the communities we serve, Delta Dental of Illinois provides the program free of charge to more than 100 schools.

Good oral health habits also need to be taught at home. In recognition of the month, we encourage caregivers to promote healthy dental habits with children and offer the following tips:

- **Keep a baby's mouth clean and start brushing.** Prior to the eruption of the first tooth, wipe your baby's mouth and gums with a clean damp cloth or gauze pad. When primary teeth begin to appear, they should be cleaned with a soft, child-sized toothbrush and a pea-sized dab of children's toothpaste, twice a day. Once your child will spit and not swallow toothpaste, begin using fluoride toothpaste.
- **Floss.** When your child has two baby teeth adjoining each other, begin using floss daily.
- **Help children establish good oral hygiene.** Brush and floss with your child regularly until he or she is around 9 years of age. Supervision, and working together, is necessary until the child is capable of doing it on his or her own.
- **Never put a child to bed with a bottle or sippy cup.** If a bottle is needed at bedtime, fill it with water rather than sugary liquids, like juice or milk.
- **Visit the dentist by age 1.** Unless a problem is suspected, your child should visit the dentist by his or her first birthday or within six months after the first tooth erupts, with regular appointments thereafter.
- **Sealants.** Ask the dentist about applying sealants to help prevent tooth decay. Sealants are thin plastic coatings applied to the chewing surface of permanent teeth located in the back of the mouth – the hardest to clean.

- **Watch the diet.** Avoid having sugar in the mouth for long periods of time. Stay away from sucking candies and chewing gum containing sugar and refrain from drinking soft drinks regularly (unless sugar-free).

For more oral health information, visit <http://oralhealth.deltadental.com/>. To find out if the “Land of Smiles” show is visiting a school in your community, go to www.deltadentalil.com/landofsmiles.

¹Surgeon General’s Report on Oral Health in America, 2000.

²Illinois Department of Public Health, Healthy Smile Healthy Growth assessment, 2003-2004.