

# Ask a Child Care Adviser - Dental Health

NCAC Child Care Adviser Angela Owens reflects on frequently asked questions about promoting dental hygiene in children's services.

Effective dental and oral care is important for children's current and future health and wellbeing. Care of the teeth and mouth often begins at home, however, carers and staff can play a significant role in either supporting or introducing strategies for dental care in child care and at home. Effective dental health for children is closely related to the development of healthy adult teeth.

## Why is effective dental health important?

The most common dental diseases in children are dental caries (dental decay) and periodontal (gum) disease. Both dental decay and gum disease can affect even very young children and are preventable through effective dental hygiene practices. Dental decay and gum disease can lead to negative outcomes for children including discomfort, other related health problems, poor nutrition, disfigurement or future dental problems. Children may also be adversely affected by experiencing major medical or dental treatment that may be required as a result of poor oral or dental health.

## How can staff and carers support children's dental hygiene?

Children's services can promote and implement effective health practices in a number of ways, beginning with infants and moving through to school age children. There are two main factors that affect dental health. These relate to:

- Dental care activities, for example, tooth brushing, visiting the dentist
- The types of food and drinks consumed and the ways these are consumed. For example, the use of infants' bottles with sweetened drinks or pacifiers ('dummies') dipped in sweet substances

Carers and staff can endeavour to address these factors in a number of ways: through the service's policies and practices; through children's programs and experiences; and by providing up to date information and support for families. It is also essential that carers and staff offer support and opportunities for children to develop self-care skills in relation to their own dental health.

### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.2, 1.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 6.2

**OSHCQA Principles:** 2.1, 2.2, 5.2, 5.4, 6.1, 6.3, 7.1

**QIAS Principles:** 3.1, 6.1, 6.4, 7.2, 8.3

## How can staff and carers include dental health in the daily program?

One of the most effective ways to incorporate dental health education in the daily program is through carers and staff using 'real' opportunities to discuss these issues with children. These discussions may be a part of mealtime routines, general hygiene routines, cooking activities, discussions about health and nutrition or discussions about home routines and lifestyles.

As children develop and their curiosity and thinking skills increase, they may express an interest or inquisitiveness about either their own, other's or even animals' teeth or eating habits. This type of spontaneously expressed interest can prompt excellent opportunities to explore dental health and hygiene issues. These opportunities may constitute 'one-off' experiences or may lead to an ongoing project depending upon children's interests.

Very young children enjoy consistency in their daily routines as this helps them to feel secure





and assists them to 'predict' or plan for what will happen next. Routine times such as meal and personal hygiene activities are therefore good times to introduce songs, rhymes and simple conversations about dental health.

Dramatic or pretend play, as well as other creative activities such as drawing, painting or sculpting can also provide opportunities for learning about dental health for both older and younger children.

Older preschool and middle childhood aged children may enjoy helping to develop, implement and monitor dental health policies and procedures in the service. It may also be appropriate for these children to help to research current information about these issues through written resources, the internet or through visits from relevant dental health professionals.

### **What can staff and carers do to promote appropriate dental health habits?**

It is important for children's health and wellbeing that services develop systems to consistently implement effective dental health and hygiene practices while children are in care. It is equally important, however, that services promote positive dental health practices in the home. To support this, services need to provide current and appropriate information to families. Written information provided for families should be translated into home languages where possible and necessary.

Apart from written materials, services may be able to communicate information about dental health and hygiene to families through pictorial posters, videos, visitors or information programs

at the service. This will depend upon the types and availability of resources that the service can access. Local and state/territory health or community organisations may be able to provide information and support in relation to dental health promotion.

It is also important to tell families about what occurs at service level to promote children's oral and dental health. Providing this information to families will help them to understand the importance of oral and dental health and may provide them with ideas and strategies to continue these practices at home.

### **Should the service have a dental health policy?**

The key to encouraging dental health and hygiene in children's services is through the development and consistent implementation of policies and procedures that are based on current, authoritative information. Organisations such as the Australian Dental Association, children's hospitals, and state or territory based community or health services may be able to provide relevant information to support the development of policies and procedures. Services need to ensure that these policies are reviewed regularly to ensure that they reflect current information. As with all policies in children's services it is also important to invite families and other stakeholders to participate in their development and review, and to ensure that policies and procedures are communicated effectively to all carers, staff and families.

While the information provided in dental health policies must be appropriate and current, it is valuable for each service to develop a policy that reflects the interests and needs of children, families, carers and staff at the service. For example, in a service where children are provided with food from home, the service may discover that many families provide their children with sugary snacks and drinks. This service may focus on the importance of healthy foods and drinks that promote dental health in the dental health policy. Another service may identify that many children have limited opportunities for brushing

Please note that when considering tooth brushing programs in services it is crucial to carefully consider current expert recommendations regarding how often each day young children should brush their teeth.

their teeth at home and subsequently emphasise a tooth brushing program at the service.

## How should staff and carers prepare for an emergency?

Aside from ongoing dental care, it is important that carers and staff are aware of how to manage dental accidents and emergencies. The procedures and recommendations may vary depending upon the ages of children, whether the teeth involved are deciduous (baby) teeth and the type of accident or injury sustained. To assist carers and staff to manage dental accidents and emergencies, services may:

- Collect contact information from families about their family dentist (if any). Ideally this should occur at enrolment
- Develop a dental accident or emergency policy and procedure, or incorporate this information into a broader service accident or emergency policy
- Provide opportunities or support for carers and staff to participate in first aid training which includes training related to dental emergencies
- Discuss and practice dental emergency or accident procedures with older children

Of course, it is preferable that where possible dental accidents be minimised or avoided altogether. Services can strive toward this through effective supervision and monitoring of safety and risks in the environment. Older children may also need to have access to appropriate protective equipment when engaging in certain sporting



activities.

Children's services have a duty of care to promote the health and wellbeing of children. Dental health care is important because inattention to this area can result in both immediate and long term harmful outcomes for children. Dental health care for younger children can also be underestimated due to the assumption that baby teeth are relatively unimportant as children lose these before their adult teeth erupt. Healthy baby teeth, however, contribute to the overall healthy development and wellbeing of children ■

## Further reading

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- Australian Dental Association - [www.ada.org.au](http://www.ada.org.au)
- Better Health Channel - [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)