

# Oral Health

A critical, but often overlooked, obstacle to student learning and achievement is poor oral health. Schools can be important partners in promoting good oral health practices and preventing oral diseases among students.

## What is Oral Health

Oral health is an essential part of overall health throughout life. Oral health can influence many developmental factors that contribute to children's overall well-being.

## Why Oral Health is Important

Tooth decay (cavities) is one of the most common chronic conditions of childhood in the United States. The most recent California Department of Public Health, Status of Oral Health in California: Oral Disease Burden and Prevention report (2017) stated that more than 53% of California kindergarten children already showed signs of tooth decay. By the third grade, 71% of students had tooth decay.<sup>1</sup> Untreated tooth decay can cause pain and infections that may lead to problems with eating, speaking, playing, and learning.

## Impact of Poor Oral Health on Learning

Oral health has a significant impact on a student's ability to achieve in school. When children's oral health suffers, so does their ability to learn. Children are often unable to verbalize their oral pain. Teachers may notice a child who is having difficulty attending to tasks or who is demonstrating the effects of pain such as anxiety, fatigue, irritability, depression, and withdrawal from normal activities. However, teachers may not understand the cause of such behavior if they are unaware that a child has an oral health problem.

## Financial Impact

Children with poor oral health are more likely to be absent from school than their peers with healthier mouths. Oral health problems cause California students to miss an estimated 874,000 days of school each year, costing schools over \$29 million resulting from a reduction in the average daily attendance rate.<sup>2</sup>

## Risk Factors for Poor Oral Health

A group of risk factors is common to many childhood diseases and conditions, including oral diseases. Addressing oral health issues as part of school programs and policies that tackle common risk factors for diseases is a key component to improving overall health for children:

- Inadequate nutrition;
- Lack of routine dental care;

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<sup>1</sup> Status of Oral health in California: Oral Disease Burden and Prevention 2017; California Department of Public Health, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

- Lack of face/mouth protection in sports; and
- Use of tobacco, alcohol, and other substances.

## Addressing Oral Health in Schools

Schools have opportunities to support students' oral health through educational programs, enforcement of kindergarten oral health assessments for school entry, and provision of oral health preventive services on school campuses:

- Kindergarten Oral Health Assessment for School Entry (Education Code 49452.8, added by AB1433, 2006 and SB379, 2017) requires all students entering public school for the first time, either in kindergarten or first grade, to have an oral health assessment and their parents/guardians to submit an assessment form certifying that their child has received the assessment. Schools should encourage the assessments and remind parents to return the form by May 31 of that school year.
- Oral Health Education—Schools can promote the lifelong oral health of students through educational programs, by providing students with opportunities to attain the skills, knowledge, and abilities they need to engage in healthy behaviors.
- Oral Health Services—Schools can promote oral health by providing preventive dental services on campus or referrals to community dental services. Preventive services include screenings, fluoride varnish application, and referrals or on-site dental sealant programs.

For more information on how to incorporate education and coordination of preventive services (screenings, fluoride varnish applications, and referrals or on-site dental sealant programs) into your school, contact:

County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency  
Oral Health Programs  
619-692-8858

[https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/dental\\_health\\_initiative\\_share\\_the\\_care.html](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/dental_health_initiative_share_the_care.html)

## Access and Eligibility for Services

Schools should provide families with information about and enrollment assistance into public dental insurance programs. All children and adults from low-income households who are eligible for full-scope Medi-Cal coverage automatically have dental coverage. Students from low-income households who do not qualify for Medi-Cal may be eligible for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).