



P R E S S R E L E A S E

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NATIONAL CHILDREN'S DENTAL HEALTH MONTH

No-Cost Early Oral Health Services Benefit Shasta County Children

REDDING-----A child's first tooth is cause for celebration! February is National Children's Dental Health Month, a reminder that preventive early oral health care for children is beneficial throughout the entire year. Taking care of that first tooth begins with clean gums for babies and good dental care for a child's emerging teeth. About 14% of children starting kindergarten in Shasta County have noticeable tooth decay. This can painfully impede the ability to learn and develop new social and behavioral skills. Early oral health services are available to bring brighter smiles, school success, and better lifelong oral health to Shasta County children ages 0-to-5.

No-cost oral health services for young children are currently being offered by two Shasta County programs. Shasta County Public Health's *Shasta Healthy Smiles* program provides tooth brushing, fluoride supplementation, and oral health education for parents, children, and teachers in preschool environments. According to Megan Johnson, program coordinator, "Children need help brushing and flossing their teeth until they are about eight years old. Parents can help their children achieve optimal oral health by helping them brush their teeth, limiting sweet drinks, including juice, and watching out for sticky foods like fruit snacks and candy." Johnson nods to water and milk and snacks like fresh fruits, cheese, yogurt, and popcorn as healthier choices parents and caregivers can make for young children.

Young children in the Intermountain area of Shasta County are provided no-cost services through Hill Country Community Clinic's *Early Childhood Oral Health* program. At early care and education sites, the

program provides oral health education and children’s dental screenings, plaque control, and fluoride varnish applications. Services for pregnant women are included in the program. Debby Durbin, a registered dental hygienist in alternative practice, delivers these services for Hill Country. Durbin has found that children who have had no exposure to the oral health program have the greatest amount of decay in their baby teeth.

Durbin emphasizes the long-term value of protecting a child’s teeth by arresting early decay, reducing the child’s fear of visiting the dentist, and establishing good dental practices that will pay off throughout life. Durbin says, “There is a very specific eruption pattern to baby teeth between the ages of 6 and 12. Even though children lose their front baby teeth first, they keep their back baby teeth until about age 12. Premature loss of these baby teeth results in a host of additional problems.” Preventive care of baby teeth reduces problems including overcrowding, malocclusion associated with TMJ, juvenile peridontitis (gum disease), and psychological and speech problems that occur when adult teeth are able to erupt prematurely.

“First 5 Shasta’s investment in early oral health continues to meet a critical need for local families,” says Muffy Berryhill, executive director of First 5 Shasta. “These efforts are aimed at improving oral health in our youngest residents and improving their oral and overall physical health into adulthood.” Both of these oral health programs for young children are funded by grants from First 5 Shasta through June 2010.

To date, First 5 Shasta has invested over \$12 million in projects and programs that benefit young children and families in Shasta County. First 5 Shasta, the Shasta Children and Families First Commission, was established after voters passed Proposition 10 in November 1998, adding a 50 cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs promoting early childhood development for expectant parents and children up to age five.

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