



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
TOM TORLAKSON, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
1430 N Street, Sacramento, CA 95814-5901
916-319-0800

California Department of Public Health
JAYANTH KUMAR, DDS, MPH, State Dental Director
1616 Capitol Avenue, Suite 74.456
Sacramento, CA 95899-7377
916-319-0827

February 23, 2016

Dear County and District Superintendents, Charter School Administrators, and High School Principals:

FEBRUARY IS NATIONAL CHILDREN'S DENTAL HEALTH MONTH

The California Department of Education and the California Department of Public Health are writing you to remind you that February is National Children's Dental Health Month and to raise awareness about the importance of good oral health for our students.

As we look at the barriers to attendance faced by California students, we can take this opportunity to focus on poor dental health as a problem that can be addressed through collaboration between educators, parents, and students. Poor dental health leads to oral and other diseases that correlate to low student performance and chronic absenteeism. We can share the message that children will better learn and succeed in the classroom when we remove barriers to attendance and overcome health problems including poor dental health.

Oral health problems are often overlooked or given low priority. However, proper dental care is extremely important because diseases that originate orally in the mouth can spread to other parts of the body, turning into a more severe systemic problem and seriously affecting a person's quality of life. Tooth decay (cavities caused from eating a poor diet and inadequate tooth brushing) is one of the most common, largest chronic health conditions during childhood. It is damage that occurs when bacteria in the mouth make acids that eat away at a tooth. Left untreated, it affects personal, physical, mental, and social well-being. Most importantly, a toothache physically obstructs a child's ability to learn while in class and generates absences from school.

Schools are ideal settings to encourage children and adolescents to adopt healthy habits and equip them with skills to make healthy decisions. Additionally, schools can leverage the Local Control Funding Formula to implement kindergarten oral health assessments (California *Education Code* Section 49452.8) to address dental problems. By instilling good oral health habits in children, we teach them about the importance of personal health and help them begin a healthy lifestyle at a young age through a few important steps:

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- Brush teeth for two minutes twice a day.
- Floss once a day.
- Bring children to a dentist at an early age to develop trust to prevent problems.
- Have regular professional teeth cleanings.

We encourage you to join us in informing children about how to practice good oral care. We also encourage you to advise parents, school personnel, and health care providers about the link between poor dental health and general health and their connection to school absences.

Some great resources for promoting good dental health can be found on the attached page.

If you have any questions regarding this subject, please contact David Kopperud, Education Programs Consultant, Coordinated Student Support Division, by phone at 916-323-1028 or by e-mail at dkopperud@cde.ca.gov.

Sincerely,



Tom Torlakson
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
California Department of Education



Jayanth Kumar
State Dental Director
California Department of Public Health

TT/JK:fl
Attachment

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