



## Oral Health for Children and Adolescents

# How Can You Help?

Oral health is an important part of overall well-being. Tooth decay (dental caries, cavities) affects children and adolescents in the United States more than any other chronic disease. Untreated tooth decay causes pain and infections that may lead to problems, such as eating, speaking, and playing.<sup>1</sup> Tooth decay can also lead to poor attention in the classroom, poor grades, and lower academic achievement. Decayed or missing teeth can cause embarrassment, low self-esteem, and social isolation.<sup>2</sup> The good news is that tooth decay and other oral health problems may be preventable. The combination of dental sealants and fluoride has the potential to nearly eliminate tooth decay among school-age children and adolescents.<sup>3</sup> Some schools provide dental screening and may also supply sealants, a protective plastic coating that can help prevent cavities.

Knowing the answers to the following questions can help you support your child's school to address oral health. If you don't know the answers to these questions, check out the school handbook or school website, attend a school wellness meeting or Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meeting, or simply ask your child's teacher.

### What's Happening at School?

1. Are there School Health Services, including a full-time school nurse, in the school building at all times to help students with chronic medical conditions or with emergencies?
2. Is there a school-based health center that provides dental services to students?<sup>4</sup>
3. Is there a school-based sealant program?
4. Is there a mobile dental clinic that comes to the school?
5. Is there a referral process in place for students with additional dental and oral health needs?
6. Is dental health taught in health education?
7. Is there a bullying prevention policy in the school or district?
8. Do classroom teachers or subject-specific teachers reward students with things other than food and beverages?
9. Do students have direct access to free and clean drinking water as a healthy alternative to sugar-sweetened beverages during the school day?



**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion





## Ideas for Parents

You can be involved in your child's school by **attending** meetings, workshops, or training events offered by the school; **communicating** with school staff and other parents; **volunteering** for school events or in your child's classroom; **reinforcing** healthy messages and practices your child learns at school; **helping** make decisions about health in the school; and **being part** of community activities supported by the school. Here are some specific ideas for how you can support your child's school in addressing oral health.

- Encourage your child to eat regular nutritious meals and avoid frequent between-meal snacking while at home and at school.
- Encourage your child to drink water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages while at home and at school.
- Take your child to the dentist for routine cleanings and oral health exams every 6 months, and discuss any concerns with the health services staff at your child's school.
- Talk to your child's dentist about dental sealants, which can protect teeth from decay, and follow their recommendations for tooth brushing.
- Join a group, such as the PTA, school wellness committee, or school health advisory council, that addresses the needs of a supportive and healthy school environment.<sup>5</sup> Inquire about the student health education curriculum.
- Ask your school nurse or other health services team members about resources in your community for dental care for you and your family.
- Encourage dental professionals in your area to volunteer their services at local schools.
- Share evidence-based websites or written materials about oral health with teachers, nurses, and administrators, when possible, (e.g., <http://www.mchoralhealth.org/index.html>).



Check out additional resources for parents related to the school nutrition environment and services, physical education and physical activity, and managing chronic health conditions at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/P4HS.htm>.

## REFERENCES

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