



Guest Column

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By Bernie Glossy, President and CEO, Delta Dental of Illinois

February is Children's Dental Health Month

Dental health is one of the most critical, unmet health care issues facing Illinois children today. Good oral health care is imperative for children, but many caregivers don't realize how important it is to establish an oral health routine at an early age. I've seen first-hand how poor oral health can negatively affect children, and Children's Dental Health Month in February is a good time to stress the seriousness of the issue.

While it's nearly preventable, in a special report on the state of oral health in America, the U.S. Surgeon General identified tooth decay as the most common chronic childhood disease and called it "America's silent epidemic." Untreated tooth decay is not only painful, but also may affect a child's ability to eat and speak, and may lead to future oral and overall health problems. Poor oral health is also detrimental to a child's learning and success in school, contributing to school absences and lower grades.

As a not-for-profit company with a mission to improve the oral health of Illinoisans, Delta Dental of Illinois offers affordable, comprehensive dental benefit programs to employers and residents throughout the state. In addition, our Foundation works to increase oral health care access and education, and recently partnered with the Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation and Michael Reese Health Trust to complete a statewide oral health report.

The encouraging news is the report found that, in general, the oral health of Illinois children is slowly improving. Approximately 22 percent of third-grade students have untreated tooth decay, down from 30 percent in the previous decade.¹ While more children now have dental insurance, there are still significant disparities in the oral health status of certain populations.

Sadly, untreated cavities and other oral health problems are alarmingly high among Illinois children living in poverty and rural areas. The report found that one-third of children in rural areas have untreated tooth decay. Illinois children living in poverty are five times more likely to have fair or poor oral health. And only half (55 percent) of children on Medicaid saw a dentist in the previous year.

The findings point to insufficient Medicaid reimbursement rates and a shortage of dental health providers as reasons why children's oral health is untreated at high rates. Programs like Medicaid and CHIP include dental coverage, but dental health providers have to accept it to increase access. Unfortunately, Illinois has the fourth lowest Medicaid reimbursement rate in the nation for pediatric dental care. Low reimbursement rates drive down provider participation. In fact, in 44 of the 102 counties in Illinois, there is only one or zero registered Medicaid dental providers.

In addition, shortages of dental health providers are growing in many rural areas, especially southern Illinois. Millions of Illinois children live in dental health provider shortage areas, and many more live in areas without access to any specialty dental providers.

On a positive note, another recent survey of Illinois children's oral health by Delta Dental of Illinois shows there are great benefits for those who have a good oral health care routine. Children whose teeth are brushed at least two times a day are more likely to be successful (66 percent), outgoing (73 percent) and proud of themselves (76 percent).²

We want every child in Illinois to have access to dental care and all of the tools available to be confident and successful from a young age. We hope that by bringing light to the seriousness of poor dental health and supporting programs that provide dental care to underserved populations, we can work with others to improve the oral health of children across the state.

We encourage you to visit OralHealthIllinois.org to learn more about the oral health challenges facing Illinois children.

¹Oral Health in Illinois Report, 2016.

²Kelton, a leading global insights firm, conducted the 2016 Delta Dental of Illinois Children's Oral Health Survey. Interviews were conducted statewide via email with 357 Illinois residents 18+. For results based on the total sample of Illinois adults, the margin of error is +/- 5.2% at a 95 percent confidence level.