

NEWS RELEASE

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Illinois Children Don't See Dentist Early Enough

Delta Dental kicks off public service campaign, helps underprivileged kids

NAPERVILLE, Ill. (April 19, 2012) – Children in Illinois don't see their family dentist on average until they are 3 ½ years old,¹ when in fact it's recommended that a child should go to the dentist within six months of getting the first tooth – and no later than the first birthday.²

The Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation is kicking off “Dentist by 1,” a statewide public service campaign to educate parents about the benefits of taking their children to the dentist by age 1 and to encourage them to schedule a visit.

“Caregivers may think because their child's baby teeth will eventually fall out, that caring for them is less important. But baby teeth help children chew and speak properly and hold space for permanent teeth,” said Katina Morelli, DDS, dental director for Delta Dental of Illinois. “Tooth decay is nearly 100 percent preventable, but can develop any time after teeth appear in the mouth, starting around 6 months of age. So it's important to begin good oral health habits, like visiting the dentist, when children are very young.”

By visiting the dentist by age 1, the child and parent can establish a relationship with a dentist, which can help set a foundation for good dental health care and habits. And studies show that early preventive dental care like check-ups and cleanings can save in future dental treatment costs. When a child can't articulate the pain resulting from dental infection, once he or she visits the dentist, the damage can be so severe it requires multiple dental visits, oral surgery or extractions – all of which could have been avoided with proper dental care.

What to Expect at a Child's First Visit

“During the first visit, the dentist will examine your child's teeth for early signs of decay, but will also look for problems with the baby's head, neck, jaws, skin and soft tissues in and around the mouth like the tongue, cheeks and lips,” said Morelli. “Your child's bite, facial growth and development will also be assessed.” In addition, the dentist will:

- Demonstrate various brushing and flossing techniques and positions to help parents care for their baby's teeth properly
- Discuss diet and feeding/snacking practices that may put the child at risk for decay
- Discuss the use of topical fluoride
- Provide anticipatory guidance for trauma prevention

At home, oral health care should begin at birth. Caregivers should gently wipe the baby's gums with a soft, wet cloth after each feeding. When primary teeth begin to come in, they should be cleaned with a smear of fluoride toothpaste and a soft, child-sized toothbrush twice a day. A pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste can be used once the child is able to spit. All tooth brushing on babies and toddlers should be performed by the parent.

As part of the “Dentist by 1” campaign, Illinois parents can help local, underprivileged children get needed oral health supplies. For each parent who pledges to take their child to the dentist by age 1 or to regular dental visits for children older than 1 at www.Dentistby1.com, the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation will donate an oral health kit to children through a local children’s charitable organization. The oral health kits include a toothbrush, floss, toothpaste and a children’s oral health tip sheet.

Parents who take the pledge will also receive an oral health care kit and will be entered into a monthly drawing for an electric toothbrush. Pledges can be made through Oct. 31, 2012.

Those interested in donating to the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation to support “Dentist by 1” and the efforts to provide oral health kits to children who need them, can visit www.Dentistby1.com and select Donate for Healthy Smiles.

Delta Dental of Illinois is providing educational materials to early Head Start agencies and other children’s charitable organizations, dentists, pediatricians and hospitals across the state.

For more information about the importance of visiting the dentist by age 1, tips on establishing good oral health habits for a lifetime of healthy smiles or to support the “Dentist by 1” initiative, visit www.Dentistby1.com.

About Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation

The Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation (DDILF) was formed in March 2008 by Delta Dental of Illinois (DDIL), a not-for-profit dental service corporation with a mission to improve the oral health of the communities it serves. DDILF is the charitable arm of DDIL and works to support and improve the oral health of people in Illinois. In the past decade, combined efforts of DDIL and DDILF have provided more than \$2 million to programs and organizations that provide oral health education and expand access to oral health care for Illinois residents. DDIL provides dental benefit programs to individuals and more than 5,000 employee groups throughout Illinois and covers two million employees and family members nationwide. DDIL and DDILF are based in Naperville, Illinois.

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¹Delta Dental of Illinois 2011 Claims Data.

²American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Dental Association.

* Up to 5,000 oral health kits will be donated to kids through the Early Head Start Association after Oct. 31, 2012.