
Pediatric Dental Disease: A Critical Marker for Children's Overall Health

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Developmental pediatrician Wendy Mouradian, M.D., at Children's Hospital in Seattle, Washington, sees children's oral health as a reflection of children's general health issues. Believing that conquering oral disease can



Dr. Mouradian and one of her patients

help conquer all disease, Dr. Mouradian calls on pediatricians, advocates, policymakers, and dentists to make a difference for children by focusing on their oral health.

Oral Disease Cuts Across the Spectrum of Children

Tooth decay, like asthma, learning difficulties, and social problems, is highly correlated with low income, limited education, and

social disadvantage. Although it causes less morbidity than its frequent occurrence would suggest, tooth decay may serve as a sentinel disease for other pediatric conditions related to inadequate diet and hygiene as well as to family conditions. Other dental conditions, including improper alignment of the jaws and teeth, oral tumors, and growth and development problems, are less common and, like most other childhood maladies, may affect children regardless of their social condition. All oral conditions, however, may be exacerbated in children with special health care needs. Again, how

well a child's dental health is managed may be a marker for how well the child's overall health is managed.

Oral Disease Is Treatable and Largely Preventable

Like most pediatric conditions, leading dental conditions that affect children (e.g., tooth decay, periodontal disease, and tobacco-related conditions) are fundamentally preventable and, once they occur, are absolutely treatable. Extreme presentations such as facial infections, draining abscesses, obviously rotted teeth, and bleeding gums are hallmarks of inadequate care or overt neglect. Dental disease speaks about more than teeth—it speaks volumes about a child's life environment, general health, and personal welfare.

Dental Disease Highlights Access-to-Care Issues

Gross inequities between the oral health of children who can access dental care and of those who cannot are exaggerated reflections of the inequities under-

lying access to care throughout our health care system. Dental insurance is far less common than medical insurance, and dental coverage for workers' dependents is eroding faster than medical coverage for dependents. Medicaid reaches far fewer children with access to dental care than children with access to medical care. Again, dental care is a bellwether for the condition of pediatric health care in the United States.

Oral Health Is a Quality-of-Life Issue

Self-esteem, the ability to eat and speak, facial appearance, and daily living free of dental discomfort all depend heavily on oral health. Dr. Mouradian points out that children with major facial developmental disturbances often place more emphasis on the appearance of their smile than on all other aesthetic concerns. If our common goal is to nurture children who can function well and be self-reliant, dental appearance may be a strong monitor of our successes and failures.

Oral Health "Teases Out Other Issues"

Dr. Mouradian states simply, "If oral health can be forgotten, kids can be forgotten." Since tooth decay is the most prevalent preventable chronic disease of childhood, failure to attend to its ravages is tantamount to failure to attend to children's basic needs. Public policies that regard dental care as an "option," administrative attitudes that ignore the unfulfilled opportunities promised by the dental Medicaid programs, parental behaviors that allow rampant oral disease to develop, and professional efforts that fail to meet the needs of all children may reflect a lack of concern for those who are our future. ■

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