

Improving the Oral Health of Children



Good oral health is about more than clean teeth. If your mouth is healthy, you are more likely to be healthier overall. And, there are links between poor oral health and diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, some cancers, and other health conditions.

Since 2000, The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio's Preventive Oral Health Care initiative has helped lay the groundwork for enhancing access to dental care and improved oral health in our 36-county service area. Because the foundation for a healthy mouth is laid during the first years of life, HealthPath has chosen to focus on supporting the oral health of children.

Cavity-Free Kids

Oral health care is vitally important to overall well-being, yet dental care remains the top unmet health need for Ohio's children. In fact, dental care remains the top unmet health need for Ohio's children. Left untreated, oral diseases impact school performance, increase health care costs, decrease overall health, affect self-confidence and sociability, and can result in pain, malnutrition, disfigurement, and even death.

To ensure that Ohio's children ages 0-12 have healthy mouths, HealthPath has selected Cavity-Free Kids as one of our result areas for 2017-2021.



Half of all third graders in Ohio have a history of tooth decay.



1 in 5 have untreated cavities.

What Influences Oral Health

Access to preventive dental services, personal hygiene, and diet all play a role in good oral health.

In many parts of Ohio, children have limited access to dental care providers because there isn't a provider close by, the family does not have insurance or money to pay for services, or the family does not have transportation or time to get the child to an appointment.

Having access to services is only part of the solution. Personal dental hygiene and diet are also important. Good dental habits for children start earlier than most people realize. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children visit the dentist by their first birthday, even if they don't have many teeth yet. Along with brushing, a healthy diet is instrumental in preventing tooth decay. Of particular concern is the amount of sugar-sweetened beverages that children consume. Studies have shown that sugar-sweetened beverages can promote tooth decay.



In 2010, three-fourths of Ohio's third graders were drinking at least one serving of pop, soda, sports drink, or other sugar-sweetened beverage per day.



2 in 5 were drinking at least two servings.





What HealthPath Will Fund

To help ensure that Ohio's children ages 0–12 have healthy mouths, HealthPath is offering funding through three initiatives: Workforce Development, Direct Service, and Community Connections. HealthPath will consider projects that align with the following strategies:

Workforce Development

(funded in 2017, 2019, 2021)

- Enhance dental professional training to include treating children ages 0-3
- Embed oral health in inter-professional education, such as for community health workers or school nurses, or in primary care or early childhood education settings, etc.
- Develop pipeline programs for young people to recognize a career path in oral health
- Expand or maintain dental residency programs

Direct Service

(funded in 2018, 2020)

- Bring oral health services to rural or underserved areas

Community Connections

These will be community-driven projects that could include:

- Oral health educational campaigns focused on drinking water instead of other liquids
- Oral health education in schools or early childhood programs
- Programs that teach parents about how to talk with their children about oral health
- Programs that provide youth with hands-on, problem-based learning around children's oral health and health issues