

## Will Hahn, Laurie Mireles and Sara Clarenbach: Community support brings oral hygiene to the classroom

In a Pajaro Valley school, a teacher thinks that her student is just slacking off -- until another student points out the swollen cheek indicating a probable tooth infection. Thousands of California children are experiencing similar unnecessary dental pain, affecting every aspect of their lives -- nutrition because it is hard to chew certain foods, sleep because of pain, and learning because toothaches caused at least 500,000 California students to miss at least one day of school in 2007.

As the recession has caused more families to lose income and/or health benefits, access to routine dental care has become even more difficult for area families. In Santa Cruz County, two local clinics -- Dientes Community Dental Care and Salud Para La Gente -- have placed staff in local schools to provide children with real-time, accessible care.

With generous financial support from the Palo Alto Medical Foundation Santa Cruz/Sutter Maternity and Surgery Center and Driscoll's, Dientes has provided classroom education on healthy oral health habits -- including toothbrushing, flossing, and diet and nutrition -- to over 3,000 local children since the spring of 2009.

Nearly a thousand children received additional preventive services on site including full exams, cleaning and protective sealants, but between 10 and 15 percent of those who receive preventive services are already experiencing severe infection or decay -- so severe that they require an urgent referral to a dentist.

Salud operates both medical and dental programs in seven Pajaro Valley schools, supported in part by generous grants from Granite Construction and Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital's Children's Miracle Network.

Between July 2009 and April 2010, Salud's dental providers logged 4,482 visits through their school-based clinics. Students with dental or medical needs can visit the Salud school clinics on their own, or with their parents, for screening and treatment to children, and health education to both children and parents.

Going directly to schools to serve children is key. Because so many families lack health and dental insurance, many children don't see a dentist unless there's an emergency -- and from the level of infection and decay we are seeing in young children, many don't even have that opportunity. Serving children in schools removes barriers parents may experience in terms of costs, transportation, or taking time off from work to bring a child to the dentist.

Schools also are far more comfortable, familiar settings than a dentist's office, helping to put a child at ease -- and to create more positive feelings about dentists and check-ups. One pediatric dentist even got a hug from an elementary school patient, and heard something she doesn't normally hear from young patients in the clinic: "When I grow up, I want to be a dentist!"

Although it is always satisfying to alleviate a child's pain and a parent's worry, we know our providers are seeing just a fraction of those in need. With community support, we hope to continue these programs and to help educate more children and families about the oral health care that can prevent these problems in the first place.

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