



Children's Oral Health

It is the position of the American Academy of Pediatrics that health care reform should:

- ★ Include dental coverage in every child's health insurance. All children should have access to primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, pediatric surgical specialists, pediatric mental and dental professionals, and hospitals with appropriate pediatric expertise.
- ★ Train child health care providers, in the absence of a dental provider, in providing oral health assessment, screening, and fluoride varnish application.
- ★ Ensure that, in the absence of a dental provider, appropriate payment be made available to physicians who provide oral health risk assessment, anticipatory guidance and apply fluoride varnish.
- ★ Authorize adequate funding for Title VII, an important program that funds not only physicians who care for children, but also pediatric dentists.

The Issue

Tooth decay (dental caries) affects children in the United States more than any other chronic infectious disease. Decay of primary teeth can affect children's growth and result in significant pain and potentially life-threatening infections. Dental decay and other oral diseases that can affect children are entirely preventable. The application of fluoride varnish by pediatricians has the potential to significantly reduce tooth decay in school-age children. Additionally, pediatricians are far more likely to encounter new mothers and infants than are dentists, and thus are in an excellent position to assist families by providing appropriate preventative dental care in the medical home. The following statistics highlight the risks to children who do not have dental care:

- ★ Dental caries are 5 times more common than asthma and 7 times more common than hay fever. More than 40 percent of children have tooth decay by the time they reach kindergarten.
- ★ Infants who are of low socioeconomic status, whose mothers have a low education level, and who consume sugary foods are 32 times more likely to have caries at the age of 3 years.
- ★ Dental decay can be well advanced by 3 years of age.

Current Status

Before 2009, most states offered a dental benefit as part of their state CHIP program, but the benefit was optional and subject to elimination when state budgets became constrained. The CHIP reauthorization signed into law by President Obama on February 4, 2009 included a "dental guarantee," which ensures that dental coverage will be offered as part of each state CHIP program. The legislation also included a dental wrap benefit which enables children of families that meet income and other eligibility requirements and receive medical benefits through an employer-sponsored medical insurance plan to access stand-alone dental coverage through CHIP. Both of these provisions will help children who have some form of medical coverage, but are denied dental coverage. Much more needs to be done to improve the oral health of US children.