

Students brush up on healthy habits

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Pictured above: Celeste Camerino, the oral health program coordinator with the Charles County Department of Health assists Dr. Helen Lee-Virgil place dental sealants on Brett Wilkinson, a second grade student at Walter J. Mitchell Elementary School. Dental sealants can prevent 70 percent of tooth decay, according to the Surgeon General.

La Plata, MD - For very little investment — the cost of a toothbrush, toothpaste, some floss and dental sealants — a parent could reduce the chances of a child developing tooth decay by 70 percent. Tooth decay is the single most common chronic childhood disease with 51 million school hours lost nationwide to poor oral health.

"A child can't concentrate if they're in pain," said Dr. Dianna Abney, health officer for the Charles County Department of Health during a free dental clinic held at Walter J. Mitchell Elementary School. If a child has a toothache, chances are they can't eat; if they can't eat, they can't learn, she said.

The Maryland School Sealant Program is grant funded through the Center for Disease Control and the Health Resources and Services Administration allowing the Maryland Office of Oral Health to provide screenings and sealants to children served by 13 health departments in the state.

From September to May, the Charles County program spends a week in 11 elementary schools — six of which are Title 1 schools — seeing students whose parents signed permission slips for the program, said Celeste Camerino, oral health program coordinator. Each year, about 700 to 800 Charles County students take part in the program that started in 2008.

Maybe parents don't have dental insurance, or their schedules are too packed to make an appointment. Dentists going into schools to reach children is an easy fix, Abney said. "We provide free access to dental care in a place where a child feels safe and it's convenient," she said.

Zachary Saunders, a second grader, tries his best to brush his teeth every morning and night so "they don't fall out." And he said he makes an effort to stay away from too much candy. "But I can't help myself," he admitted.

Healthy teeth are important, said Brett Wilkinson, also a second grade student grade student at Mitchell.

"So they don't break in half ... How am I going to be able to eat if they all break," he asked. "And I get really hungry."

Sealants go over six-year molars, said John Welby, director of the Oral Health Literacy Campaign with the Office of Oral Health of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

While other teeth are smooth, molars are rougher and bigger with pits and grooves that are breeding ground for bacteria, he said. Dental health is tied to overall physical wellbeing, Welby added.

There have been connections tying poor oral health to diabetes and heart disease. One of the most stunning stories about the importance of oral health in children is the 2007 death of Deamonte Driver, a 12-year-old Prince George's County boy who died after bacteria from an abscessed tooth spread to his brain, Welby said.

"Oral health is an infectious disease," he said. "And it's 100 percent preventable through simple means: brushing twice a day, getting fluoride — 96 percent of Maryland's tap water has fluoride in it — and getting sealants."

Charles County Public Schools provides 26,300 students in grades prekindergarten through 12 with an academically challenging education. Located in Southern Maryland, Charles County Public Schools has 36 schools that offer a technologically advanced, progressive and high quality education that builds character, equips for leadership and prepares students for life, careers and higher education.

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