



11/19/2020

## Oral Health and Learning

*“You cannot educate a child who is not healthy, and you cannot keep a child healthy who is not educated.” -Joycelyn Elders, M.D., former U.S. Surgeon General*

Health and well-being include all body parts, including the mouth. Good oral health supports life-long health, learning, job success, and relationships with others. Unfortunately, many children suffer from painful tooth decay (cavities) that can impact learning and life in many ways. The best protection from cavities is good oral hygiene, regular access to professional care, a healthy diet of low sugar food and beverages, the mineral fluoride, and dental sealants.

### Impact of Poor Oral Health on Learning

Children may miss school because of problems with their teeth or in their mouth. Oral pain can make it hard for children to focus on schoolwork or get enough sleep and may lead to disappointments in school.

Reasons can include:

- Feeling embarrassed or sad about discolored, broken, or missing teeth.
- Feeling shy or depressed because of how their smile looks.
- Not able to talk for fear of being made fun of.
- A decreased appetite that impacts motivation.
- A decreased appetite that leads to food deficiencies.

### School Attendance and Learning

- ✓ Children with oral health problems miss more school days than those children without mouth pain.
- ✓ Children from low-income families are six times as likely to miss school.
- ✓ Speech development problems occur more often in children with missing teeth.

### Impact of Poor Oral Health on Overall Well-Being

Poor nutrition during childhood can have negative effects on children’s brain development. Children sometimes do not know their problem is the result of a painful tooth. Children may act out and teachers may punish them for behavior problems rather than understanding the reason could be a toothache.

### Illinois Programs are in Place to Help

Head Start Programs:

- ✓ Offer classes on nutrition and oral health
- ✓ Evaluate for learning disabilities

### School-Based Oral Health Programs:

- ✓ Dental exams
- ✓ Dental cleanings
- ✓ Fluoride treatments
- ✓ Dental sealants
- ✓ Referral and case management

### Resources

Holt K, Barzel R. 2013. [Oral health and learning: When children's oral health suffers, so does their ability to learn \(3rd ed.\)](#). Washington, DC: National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center, 4 pp.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/npao/oralhealth.htm>