

## *Healthy Smiles for Children with Disabilities Anderson Center for Dental Care*

Healthy Smiles for Children with Disabilities was initiated by the Anderson Center for Dental Care of Children's Hospital to address the leading infectious disease of children, early childhood cavities. Funded by the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities, the program is designed to help families improve and maintain oral health for their children with autism and other disabilities. Children, birth to 3 in the Early Start Program are targeted and referred by the San Diego Regional Center (SDRC), Exceptional Family Resource Center (EFRC), and early childhood educators.

### **BACKGROUND:**

- Although the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentists recommend the first dental assessment by age one, more than 95% of children screened in the Early Start Program have never seen a dentist.
- The Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health noted that there is a direct relationship between oral and systemic health and that oral health is essential to healthy development, nutrition, speech, and self-image.
- Children with disabilities often have additional challenges to preventing dental disease and accessing dental care. Many infants and toddlers with Autism experience oral sensitivities that can make daily oral hygiene and obtaining dental treatment extremely difficult.



### **THE PROGRAM INCLUDES:**

- 1) **Parent education via home visits** includes a risk assessment and information on the bacterial transmission of cavities. All aspects of preventing dental disease including techniques to address oral sensitivity and toothbrushing are discussed as needed.
- 2) **Dental screening and referral** is provided at home visits and at selected community events. Children are referred for regular check-ups or dental treatment as needed.
- 3) **Care coordination** is provided for children with Autism needing urgent dental care.
- 4) **Family peer support** is provided by parents of children with Autism who have overcome challenges with oral sensitivity and toothbrushing, and are trained as PALS (Parents Activity Listening for Support). PALS are linked to families through the Exceptional Family Resource Center to provide encouragement to other families via email or phone.
- 5) **Families receive training through the Autism Society and other support groups, Exceptional Family Resource Center, and early childhood education programs.** In addition, educational articles on oral health are included in the Autism Society and Regional Center's newsletters.
- 6) **A parent education flyer, *Healthy Smiles for Children with Autism*,** specifically designed to improve oral health for children with Autism will be developed.
- 7) **Directory of Dentists Treating Children with Autism** will be developed to assist families in accessing dental care for their children.
- 8) **For more information on *Healthy Smiles for Children with Disabilities Program*,** contact Kay Stuckhardt, RDH, MPH, Project Coordinator, at [kstuckhardt@chsd.org](mailto:kstuckhardt@chsd.org)

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