Too few of California’s most vulnerable young children are receiving oral health services¹.

More than 1/2 of ER visits for dental problems are kids 0-6, but only 35% of kids 0-6 received a preventive visit.
Data Highlights

Tooth decay is the most common chronic illness among children,² five times more common than asthma.³ Still, in half of California’s 58 counties there is no pediatric dentist for children enrolled in Denti-Cal,⁴ the dental component of Medi-Cal. Our state has one of the nation’s lowest Denti-Cal reimbursement rates,⁵ offering roughly one-third of the rate of private insurers.⁶ This is a major factor contributing to the shortage of Denti-Cal providers.⁷

Low-income kids suffer from inadequate access to dental care. While 55 percent of California children (over five million in total) are enrolled in Medi-Cal,⁸ fewer than half have received any dental service during the previous year.⁹ When children go without preventive oral health care, it can lead to costly problems. Each year, over 25,000 children’s dental-related emergency room visits are likely costing the state millions,¹⁰ and over 500,000 dental-related school absences cost schools $30 million.¹¹ Managing symptoms of tooth decay is ten times more expensive than providing preventive services.¹² Kids with dental problems also get lower grades, another cost to struggling children and families.¹³

A more comprehensive approach to improving access to oral health care has proven successful in Sonoma County. The county has opened new dental clinics, increased the number of pediatric dentists, and launched programs such as the Women, Infants and Children Supplemen tal Nutrition Dental Day Program, which has seen more than 10,000 patients who would otherwise go untreated.¹⁴

Pro-Kid® Policy Agenda

California must give all kids access to timely dental care and should reinvest in preventive services to treat children where they are, including schools and early learning programs.

Momentum

California kids need better oral health care. According to a recent report, too few kids enrolled in Medi-Cal receive services, but little progress has been made to improve children’s oral health care. The state has not yet restored funding for the California Children’s Dental Disease Prevention Program, though it was effective in providing access to oral health care for students at low-income schools. California recently made a modest increase in Medi-Cal reimbursement rates to restore prior cuts, but rates are still too low. One bright spot is that California recently received a federal grant to improve oral health and increase utilization of oral health services for pregnant women and infants at high risk for oral disease. These funds will support a project to integrate oral health and primary care, improving access to both.

Spotlight

Medical-dental collaborations can increase preventive care

To see how Los Angeles County is increasing preventive services among children ages one to six, go to prokid.info/cnlacdp