Oral health has become a major health and policy concern for our nation and community. Tooth decay (dental caries) is the single most common chronic disease of childhood.¹ In California, approximately 6.3 million children, or two-thirds of all children in the state, suffer needlessly from poor oral health by the time they reach the third grade.² Approximately 7 percent of California children missed school due to a dental problem in 2007, excluding time for cleaning or routine check-up.² Over 500,000 school days were missed due to dental problems in California in 2007 and there were more than 83,000 visits to California hospital emergency departments for preventable dental conditions.²

In Santa Barbara County (SBC), kindergarten assessments show a worsening trend of untreated decay reported compared to California children’s data. Untreated tooth decay can cause pain and infection that can lead to problems with nutrition, growth, school readiness, and speech problems.

Kindergarten Assessments AB1433
% Untreated Decay Reported – Comparison County/State

Source: California Dental Association
Santa Barbara County’s elementary school children had twice the rate of dental emergencies than children in comparable schools state wide.

![Dental Emergencies Elementary School Screenings](chart.png)

There has been a local effort to increase fluoride varnish applications. The community-based fluoride varnish application program began with funding from Tobacco Settlement and is provided through partnerships with many agencies and volunteers. Fluoride varnish applications were provided at California Health & Disability Prevention (CHDP) Program visits, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Services, medical providers and to preschool and kindergarten students.

Recommended key oral health messages:

- Educate parents on oral health issues
  - transmissible nature of cavity-causing bacteria – do not put anything in a child’s mouth that has been in parents mouth
  - wipe or brush baby’s teeth daily, especially after eating, with a clean washcloth
  - no bottles at bed-time; stop bottle-feeding at 12 months of age
  - introduce a cup around 6 months
  - use of pea-size amount of fluoride toothpaste twice daily over age 2
  - dilute juice with equal amount of water
  - early dental visits
  - ask for fluoride varnish

- Educate children about proper oral hygiene
  - importance of dental check-up
  - importance of teeth and how to keep teeth strong
  - how they get cavities
  - limit sweet and sticky foods; offer healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables and cheeses

- Recognize signs of early childhood caries and refer to dental providers

1 Affordability of Dental Care is Linked to School Absences. Pourat, Nadareh. UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.
2 Denti-Cal Facts and Figures
c) Emergency Department Visits for Preventable Dental Conditions in California, California HealthCare Foundation, May 2009