

Christiana Care promotes children's dental health

Two departments within Christiana Care have joined forces to promote children's dental health, particularly as it relates to the first three years of life.

The Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery and Hospital Dentistry and the Pediatric Practice Program at the Wilmington Hospital Health Center are engaged in a campaign to increase awareness and education among parents and children. Their efforts dovetail nicely with National Children's Dental Health Month, the annual February observance established by the American Dental Association. Serendipitous circumstance brought the two departments together in such a timely fashion. Essentially, Valerie Starrett, RN, in Care Management, acted as catalyst for the collaboration.

Educational project

Starrett became an enthusiastic champion for children's dental health via a service project she needed to complete for a community nursing course at Immaculata University. Seeking an educational project topic, Starrett first turned to Christiana Care's Pediatrics professionals. "She met with me and other attending physicians, and we all decided that dental education would enable all of us to have an impact," recalls Shirley Klein, M.D., the Pediatric Practice Program's attending physician director.

"The physicians noted a lack of education about children's dental health, especially for infants, preschoolers and school-age children," says Starrett. "From there, I did research on children's oral health."



Brothers Ja'Shaun, 5, and Ja'Sun Johnson, six-months, with their mother, Marqueta Johnson, listen to Wilmington Hospital Health Center Pediatrics and Dentistry staff talk about the importance of dental health, starting during the earliest stages of childhood. From left, are Jocelyn Grazela, M.D., Robert Arm, D.M.D., Edwin Granite, D.M.D., and Shirley Klein, M.D.

As a result of that research, Starrett identified specific education areas and came up with activities and health care supplies she wanted to provide for children. "The Department of Health and Social Services, specifically the dental group in Dover, gave me some supplies, and I made up 'goodie bags' that included toothbrushes, toothpaste and informational materials for children and parents," she says.

However, the donated supplies weren't nearly enough, considering the number of children and parents that needed to be educated.

Christiana Care adds support

Seeking additional help, Starrett contacted Edwin L. Granite, D.M.D., program director of the Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery and Hospital Dentistry. "I asked him if he could provide some more supplies that would promote dental awareness and education," she says.

Understanding the importance of early-life dental health, Dr. Granite readily obliged. "Unfortunately, too few people are aware that establishing sound oral hygiene habits in the first three years of life is as important as establishing general, bodily hygiene," he indicates. "Habits established in the first three years perpetuate themselves throughout life."

Importance of 'baby teeth'

This especially relates to the health of the so-called "baby teeth," which

many people think of as disposable and less important than later permanent teeth. But that's a misconception. "Baby teeth hold spaces for the path of permanent teeth," says Klein.

There are other crucial considerations, indicates Melissa Crisconi, RN, BSN, of the Pediatrics Practice Program. "Baby teeth have a lot to do with speech development as well as the proper alignment of their permanent teeth and jaw."

Dental Health Month activities

As part of the Dental Health Month observance, throughout February the two departments hand out "goodie bags" at the Wilmington Hospital Health Center filled with toothpaste, toothbrushes, informative literature and activity sheets. This not only fosters better oral health, but cooperation between children and parents as far as dental care.

"It's helpful to develop good dental hygiene habits at a very young age, because children are less resistant and more interested," explains Crisconi. "They want to please the parent. So it provides a nice interaction between parent and child."

In addition, Christiana Care displays posters and informational material in exam and waiting rooms. "This helps make everyone aware of the importance of brushing, flossing, eating healthy and seeing the dentist," says Starrett. ●