



Summary of Model Court Participation in Children's Dental Health Month 2008

*Prepared by Paula Campbell and Joshua B. Padilla
National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
Permanency Planning for Children Department*

Dental health is a vital component of a child's development. Poor dental health can have physical, psychological, and social consequences, such as immune deficiencies, poor self esteem, or poor peer relationships. These problems are exacerbated when they afflict children who are abused and neglected. To increase awareness with regard to the dental health of children involved in the Family Courts, the Permanency Planning for Children Department (PPCD) of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), and through the efforts of the Mental Health/Medical-Legal Issues Committee, collaborated with the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) and Procter & Gamble to implement the Children's Dental Health Month (CDHM) initiative in February 2008.

Preparation for Children's Dental Health Month began at the Model Court All-Sites Conference in October 2007. Dr. Beverly Largent, AAPD incoming President, and Dr. Pitts Hinson, the current President, presented a session geared at educating Model Court teams on the importance of dental health. After the presentation, Model Courts represented at the conference volunteered to implement the initiative. The AAPD provided brochures and posters for each participating Model Court, and Procter & Gamble donated 18,000 sets of age-appropriate toothbrushes and toothpaste for children ranging in age from birth to adolescence. Participating Model Courts also received the *Technical Assistance Brief "Children's Dental Health: The Next Frontier in Well-Being."* Volunteer Model Courts that agreed to participate in Children's Dental Health Month enacted the Initiative during February 2008.

Volunteer Model Courts participated in the initiative in pilot courtrooms. In these courtrooms, judicial officers actively inquired about the dental health issues affecting the families before them, and distributed toothbrushes and toothpaste to children and their families in court. In addition, dental health



A child participating in dental health month activities with the Miami Model Court.

issues were discussed during collaborative meetings and dental health service providers were included in Family Court proceedings.

After completion of Children's Dental Health Month, the PPCD analyzed the effectiveness of the initiative. Participating judicial officers were asked to provide written narratives of their experience. In addition, an online survey was developed and distributed to key stakeholders who worked in jurisdictions that participated in Children's Dental Health Month. This survey was designed to examine how the initiative was implemented and whether participants believed it successfully increased awareness in regard to the dental well-being of children. What follows is a synthesis of the feedback received from these two data sources.



Administrative Judge Cindy S. Lederman reads to children about dental care.

Launching the Initiative

As part of its participation in the initiative, the Miami Model Court, led by Administrative Judge Cindy S. Lederman and Model Court Lead Judge Jeri B. Cohen, launched the "Brushes from the Bench" campaign. The campaign kicked-off with free dental check-ups provided by the Miami Children's Hospital Dental Mobile Clinic van. Model Court judges handed out free toothbrushes to children in the child welfare system, and informed caregivers about the importance of regular dental check-ups. The efforts of the Miami Model Court were covered in *The Miami Herald*, with photos of the children and judges at the mobile health van. In the opinion of the judges, the "Brushes from the Bench" initiative was very successful and resulted in a collaborative partnership with the Miami Children's Hospital. As Judge Lederman reported, "Now the van will come once a month. This project has changed the lives of our children." The Dental Mobile Clinic has also begun to perform oral surgeries for some of the children in need.

Reaction of Participants to the Initiative

Lead Judge Patricia M. Martin of the Chicago Model Court reported that the youth in her courts were very excited to receive toothbrushes and toothpaste, and considered them as special treats. One boy couldn't wait to use his new 'treats' to brush his teeth. According to Judge Martin, each courtroom in the Chicago Model Court had a supply of toothbrushes and toothpaste, and Court Coordinators passed them out whenever children appeared in court. Additionally, Public Guardians, who are the attorneys who represent children in Cook County, took toothbrushes and toothpaste with them on visits with their clients. Dental hygiene was emphasized among the parents as well, and many of the adults were also given

toothbrushes and toothpaste, along with their children. This proved to be an opportunity to further refine their parenting skills while participating in an activity with their children.

The positive response of children and parents was not unique to Judge Martin's courtroom. Results from the online survey indicated that the dental packets were well received. Approximately 91.7% of respondents indicated that children reacted "positively" or "very positively" upon receiving dental supplies. It appears the positive reaction by the families before Judge Martin was generally shared in Model Courts across the country.

Increased Awareness of, and Contact with Dental Providers

One of the primary goals of the Children's Dental Health Month initiative was to increase collaboration between family courts and local dentists. In the Reno Model Court, Lead Judge Deborah E. Schumacher mailed letters to dentists in the community to let them know that the Family Court was participating in Children's Dental Health Month. The responses received from local dentists were very positive, with many dentists responding to volunteer their services. Other dental providers donated additional supplies of toothbrushes and toothpaste. As a result of the response, the Reno Model Court compiled a list of area dentists to contact for emergencies and distributed this list to the child welfare agency, as well as to Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), and parent and child attorney team members during the Model Court's regular collaborative meetings.

In addition to reaching out to dental providers, the Reno Model Court also addressed dental well-being during hearings. Judicial officers asked questions about the dental health of the children in foster care and educated parents on the dental needs of

"It is my distinct hope that this campaign will make a positive impact on reducing the significant dental problems found in many underserved children by emphasizing the importance of all children to have a dental home."

*-John Rutkauskas,
Executive Director,
American Academy of
Pediatric Dentistry*

children, directing the parents to meet with social services to identify an available dentist based on the parents' financial circumstances. As in other jurisdictions, toothbrushes and toothpaste were provided for the children in a fun environment where they could pick out their favorite design to take home. In situations where the children had not been returned to the parents, the parents were provided with toothbrushes to give their children at their next visit. An unexpected result was that several parents asked for toothbrushes for themselves as well, after being made aware of the importance of dental health. The Reno Model Court also set-up a table in their lobby with a supply of toothbrushes, toothpaste, and dental care information pamphlets. The court made contact with a group of dentists who volunteered to work *pro bono*, and applications for their services were also available at the information table.

The positive results of the outreach efforts of the Reno Model Court mirrored the experience of other Model Courts. According to the respondents of the online survey, 36% of respondents indicated it had led to a significant increase, 57% indicated it led to a moderate increase, while only 7% indicated it had no increase. Outreach to dental service providers also allowed courts to assess their current capacity to address dental health issues. Respondents in some jurisdictions were surprised to find dental health service providers that were willing to work *pro bono* or accept Medicaid in their jurisdiction. In other jurisdictions, attempts to reach out to the community revealed a lack of dental health providers available in their jurisdictions. Gauging from the results of the online survey, it appears valuable information was garnered during the outreach to dental health service providers, informing jurisdictions of the dental resources available, and facilitating action plans to increase the capacity to address dental health issues in jurisdictions where dental services were lacking.

Increases in Dental Health Awareness and Inquiries Involving Dental Health

The Honolulu Model Court reported that all Juvenile Division Judges participated in Children's Dental Health Month and distributed toothbrushes and toothpaste to all foster children in their Special Services and Child Protective Services court calendars. Model Court Lead Judge Bode Uale also donated extra toothbrushes and toothpaste to the Detention Home Superintendent for the children there. While the initiative was designed to be piloted in one volunteer courtroom in each participating Model Court, the Honolulu Model Court judges decided to inquire about the dental health and well-being of the children before them at each hearing in every courtroom.

To support the development of the initiative, PPCD, AAPD, and Procter & Gamble coordinated efforts to increase awareness of dental health issues through three means: providing materials and information to enact the initiative; emphasizing the topic at 2007 All-Sites Conference; and publication of the *Technical Assistance Brief, "Children's Dental Health: The Next Frontier in Well-Being."* Online survey respondents were asked to rate how frequently dental health issues were addressed in child abuse and neglect court hearings in their jurisdiction as a result of these informational resources. Respondents indicated that the inquiries regarding health inquiries increased as a result of all three sources. On all three measures, respondents indicated the number of dental inquires increased in about "half of the cases" to it being addressed "frequently." The mean ratings and specific responses to increases in dental inquiries are presented in the graph on the following page.

"Overall, Children's Dental Health Month opened many of our eyes to additional services in the community and provided an opportunity to collaborate with local dental providers to connect the service providers to the families in our court"
- Buffy Dreiling,
Juvenile Court Master,
Reno Model Court



Children draw in dental coloring books as part of Dental Health month activities.

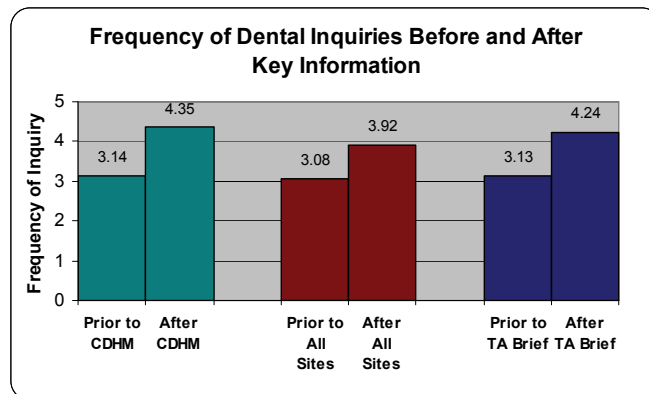
Impact of the Children’s Dental Health Month Initiative

Beyond enhancing awareness and support for dental issues, the Dental Health Month Initiative successfully increased stakeholders’ awareness of dental issues. All of the respondents to the online survey believe that dental health is an “important” well-being issue. Those that participated in the initiative indicated they plan to continue to inquire about dental health issues and make routine inquiries at hearings. In addition, stakeholders seem committed to increasing collaborative efforts, and incorporating systemic change to allow for children’s representatives and child welfare professionals to advocate for dental well-being. According to those who participated in the initiative, its impact has made a lasting impression on participants, one which will impact future day-to-day Family Court practice.

Both the narratives and survey results indicate that there was great buy-in among the stakeholders who participated in the initiative. The majority of respondents indicated the initiative was worth the time invested in implementing it, and that they believed dental well-being is an important issue. Respondents also indicated that implementation of the initiative lead to greater discussion of the issue in dependency cases. The Children’s Dental Health Month initiative was successful in increasing awareness about dental well-being, and allowed courts to identify areas for improvement. Stakeholders believed their efforts were important, and the Model Courts in the participating jurisdictions increased their commitment to inquiring about and ensuring the dental well-being of children before the court.

Conclusion

Overall, the Children’s Dental Health Month initiative was reported to be a success. In general, it appears the initiative provided Model Court stakeholders with the opportunity to learn more about the importance of dental health for children in foster care, as well as increasing understanding as how to tap dental health resources in the community. In some instances, efforts to reach dental service providers increased the courts’ awareness of the willingness of dental providers to voluntarily donate dental work for children in foster care. In other instances, participation in the initiative led to the conclusion that more outreach was needed for greater inclusion of dental service providers to address the issue of children’s dental well-being in Model Court jurisdictions.



University of Nevada
P.O. Box 8970
Reno, Nevada 89507

For more information please contact the PPCD
at (775) 327-5300
or caninfo@ncjfcj.org