

---

**For Information**

---

**REPORT TITLE: Children’s Oral Health – Public Health Program and Service Update**

**FROM:** Nancy Polsinelli, Commissioner of Health Services  
Nicholas Brandon, Acting Medical Officer of Health

---

**OBJECTIVE**

To provide an update on the oral health program and services for children.

**REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- Oral health is an important component of a child’s overall health.
  - Access to dental care can be challenging for low-income families. The children’s oral health program helps to increase access to dental services for eligible children whose family is experiencing financial hardship.
  - The children’s oral health program was paused in 2020 due to the COVID-19 response.
  - A phased-in approach to reopen the children’s oral health program started in November 2022 with the plan to return to full capacity by late 2024.
- 

**DISCUSSION**

**1. Background**

Oral health is an important component of a child’s overall health. Tooth decay is the most common, yet preventable, childhood chronic disease in Canada. Untreated tooth decay can lead to pain and infection which may result in difficulty eating, speaking and learning. Dental diseases often begin in the preschool years. It is essential to start good oral health habits from an early age to help prevent dental problems.

Dental services, apart from some in-hospital dental surgeries, are not covered under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). Access to dental care can be challenging for low-income families. Some residents do not have dental insurance or the ability to pay out of pocket. The children’s oral health program helps to increase access to dental services for eligible children whose family is experiencing financial hardship.

**2. Public Health Oral Health Services for Children**

Public health programs and services help to improve health and reduce health inequities in accordance with the Ontario Public Health Standards (see related report listed on the April 27, 2023 Regional Council agenda titled "The Oral Health System - A Picture in Peel"). This includes conducting dental screening for children and providing the Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) program which offers free dental services for eligible children 17 years of age and under. Public health also undertakes health promotion activities to help improve the oral health of children.

## **Children's Oral Health – Public Health Program and Service Update**

The OPHS outlines several intended program outcomes health units aim to achieve such as:

- decreased health inequities related to the health of school-aged children;
- the identification of children and youth at risk of poor oral health outcomes;
- improved access to oral health care for children and youth from low-income families; and
- improved oral health of children and youth.

### **a) Children's Oral Health Program**

The children's oral health program provides various free dental services including:

- dental screening (a quick look inside the child's mouth) for children 17 years of age and under in select grades in publicly funded elementary schools and community clinics. It helps to identify children in need of dental care e.g., urgent and preventive dental needs.
- preventive dental services (e.g., teeth cleaning, dental sealants and professionally applied topical fluoride) for eligible children. These services are provided in fixed, mobile, and portable clinics in school and/or community locations.
- case management to assist the parent/guardian with accessing private and community-based dental services for their children in addition to those offered by public health clinics.

In 2019, approximately 101,000 children received a dental screening either at a school or in a community clinic. Of the children screened approximately:

- 11 per cent were identified with an urgent dental need requiring dental treatment. Oral health staff notify and follow-up with the parent/guardian of these children to assist them with accessing dental services.
- 51 per cent were identified with a need for preventive dental services (e.g. teeth cleaning, dental sealants and professionally applied topical fluoride). The parent/guardian of these children are notified.

### **b) COVID-19 Impact**

The children's oral health program was paused in 2020 due to the COVID-19 response. The oral health contact centre reopened in Fall 2020 to answer questions and provide parents/guardians with support to navigate the HSO program application process. During the pandemic, eligible families could apply for the HSO program to access free dental services for their children.

### **c) Gradual Reopening of the Children's Oral Health Program**

A phased-in approach to reopen the children's oral health program started in November 2022 with the plan to return to full capacity by late 2024.

#### **Phase 1: Dental Screening in Elementary Schools**

- The gradual reopening of dental screening in all elementary schools will occur over the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 school years. This approach will allow every child an opportunity to be screened.
- Schools identified with the highest needs pre-pandemic were prioritized for dental screening earlier in the school year.

## Children’s Oral Health – Public Health Program and Service Update

### Phase 2: Dental Screening in Dental Clinics

- Reopened dental clinics for screening in spring 2023 with capacity gradually increasing as more Oral Health staff return from the pandemic response.

### Phase 3: Preventive Dental Clinics

- Reopening preventive dental services (fixed, portable and mobile delivery models) is planned for mid to late 2023.

### 3. Canada Dental Benefit

The Government of Canada has implemented the Canada Dental Benefit, phase 1 of the Canadian Dental Care Plan (see “The Oral Health System – A Picture in Peel”). It is available for children under 12 years of age in eligible families who have an adjusted family net income of less than \$90,000 per year and who do not have access to private dental insurance. It will allow eligible families to receive upfront, direct payments up to \$650 per child, per year, for two years for oral health services.

Children under 12 years of age who are currently covered by the HSO program may also be eligible for the Canada Dental Benefit if they are incurring out of pocket costs for dental services and if their family meets all the criteria to qualify for the benefit. Out of pocket costs include costs not reimbursed under a government program e.g. HSO program.

### FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The children’s oral health program is funded through a cost-sharing model between the Region and the Ministry, with a total budget of \$9,007,619. The budget includes \$1,691,532 for two external partnerships with the East Mississauga Community Health Centre and WellFort Community Health Services to provide services to children enrolled in the Healthy Smiles Ontario program.

### CONCLUSION

Oral health is an important aspect of a child’s overall health. Low-income families can face difficulties in accessing dental services. To help address this issue, the children’s oral health program assists eligible children in accessing dental care. A phased-in approach to gradually reopen the program will continue, focusing efforts on preventing dental disease and increasing access to dental care for children in Peel.

---



Nancy Polsinelli, Commissioner of Health Services

*Authored By: Katherine O’Rourke, Health Promoter, Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention*