
For Information

REPORT TITLE: Children’s Oral Health Program – Bridging the Gap for Children Most in Need

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OBJECTIVE

To provide an update on how the Children’s Oral Health Program is supporting unmet dental needs for children in the community.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- The Children’s Oral Health Program provides free dental screening, preventive dental services and navigation assistance to eligible children.
 - In 2025, approximately 75,300 children were screened, and approximately 9,100 children were identified with an urgent dental need. Over 50,200 children were identified with a preventive dental need.
 - In 2025, approximately 3,700 children received preventive dental services in select elementary schools, clinics, community agencies, childcare centres, and during emergency responses.
 - Healthy Smiles Ontario and the Canadian Dental Care Plan have improved access to dental care; however, many children continue to face barriers and experience urgent or ongoing dental needs.
 - The Children’s Oral Health Program reduces barriers and improves access to dental care through specialized outreach and community partnerships to meet the unmet needs of children in Peel.
 - Public Health’s participation in the First Nations Evacuation response highlights the Children’s Oral Health Program’s capacity to meet community needs beyond traditional public health settings to provide dental services to the First Nations community.
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DISCUSSION

1. Background

a) Importance of Oral Health

Oral health is an important part of overall health. Poor oral health is linked to chronic conditions such as diabetes, respiratory illness and cardiovascular disease. Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease in Canada. In Peel, approximately one in three children have experienced tooth decay by junior kindergarten. Untreated tooth

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decay can lead to an urgent dental need, such as pain and infection, which may result in difficulty eating, speaking and learning.

b) Public Health Requirements and Barriers to Care

In Ontario, Public Health offers oral health programs and services to help reduce health inequities for children. Under the Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services and Accountability, Public Health is required to conduct dental screening for children 17 years of age and younger and provide access to the Healthy Smiles Ontario program, in accordance with the Ministry of Health Oral Health Protocol, 2021.

The program addresses the health outcomes that are influenced by social and economic factors such as cost and access to dental services. These financial barriers, combined with challenges such as transportation, taking time off work, language and cultural needs, and navigating the system, delay preventive care and could contribute to urgent dental needs.

The Children’s Oral Health Program is an important means to bridge the gap and support children with unmet dental needs across the community. These efforts are strengthened through Health Promotion and application of the principles of the Ottawa Charter.

2. Children’s Oral Health Program Supporting Dental Needs for Eligible Children in the Community

The Children’s Oral Health Program emphasizes prevention, early identification of dental needs and equitable access to care. This is accomplished by delivering dental screening, preventive dental services and navigation assistance to eligible children through the Healthy Smiles Ontario Program.

Services are delivered in elementary schools, clinics, community agencies, childcare centres, and during emergency responses. To further expand access, the new mobile dental clinic, approved by Council in the 2026 budget, will be operational in 2027.

The Canadian Dental Care Plan, introduced in 2023, provides financial benefits that improves access for children. Despite publicly funded programs, the number of children with preventive and urgent dental needs remains high.

In 2025:

- Approximately 75,300 children were screened
- Approximately 9,100 children were identified with an urgent dental need and referred for treatment
- Over 50,200 children were identified with a preventive dental need
- Approximately 3700 children received preventive dental services

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To better understand barriers to care, the Children’s Oral Health Program began collecting sociodemographic data in 2025 from families accessing the Public Health dental clinics. This information will support future planning by:

- Identifying who accesses our services and who we may be missing
- Identifying disparities in access to services, and
- Exploring opportunities to improve and tailor services to community needs

Results from the first six months of the sociodemographic data collection confirmed:

- Nearly 50 per cent of the children were born outside of Canada
- 72 per cent arrived within the last five years
- More than 100 unique ethnic or cultural origins, highlighting the diversity of Peel’s population

This work contributes to a broader Health Services effort to better understand community needs and improve program responsiveness.

Through outreach and community partnerships, the Children’s Oral Health Program helps reduce barriers and improve access to dental services for children with unmet needs. The following examples demonstrate how these services were delivered throughout the community:

a) Elementary Schools

Each year, the Children’s Oral Health Program uses current data to identify schools with high dental needs. In these schools, children are provided preventive dental services (e.g. dental sealants, fluoride treatments, and dental cleanings) during their school day. Delivering these services within schools reduces barriers, increases access and is an upstream approach that helps reduce tooth decay.

In the 2025/2026 school year:

- 114 of 351 schools were identified with very high dental needs
- Preventive dental services will be provided in 27 of these schools

The remaining 87 schools represent future opportunities to expand access.

b) Childcare Centres

Good oral health habits from an early age are essential. Providing dental screening and professionally applied topical fluoride in childcare centres are early interventions to help prevent dental problems such as tooth decay. In addition, the Children’s Oral Health Program encourages regular dental visits and choosing healthy foods.

In 2025, the Children’s Oral Health Program provided dental screening and professionally applied topical fluoride in 35 childcare centres.

- Approximately 970 children received a dental screening
- Approximately 570 children received a professionally applied topical fluoride

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c) Community Agencies

The Children’s Oral Health Program works with community partners such as newcomer centres and shelters. These families experience multiple barriers such as cost and housing instability, which can delay preventive care and contribute to higher dental needs. Our program delivers services in their trusted community environments where families feel supported.

In 2025:

- 142 children received dental screening and preventive dental services
- Families were connected to additional supports to promote overall well-being

d) First Nations Evacuation

In 2025, three First Nations communities were evacuated to Peel Region due to floods and wildfires. The Children’s Oral Health Program responded to the communities’ request for dental care services. Public Health collaborated with various organizations to support these communities as dental needs were high. Using a culturally sensitive and trauma-informed approach, the following services were provided:

- Dental screening for 138 children
- Preventive dental services for 84 children
- Referrals for 90 children with urgent dental needs (e.g. pain, infection) to community health centres and/or private dental clinics

The Children’s Oral Health Program’s unique and innovative approach to providing dental services enabled Public Health to respond and adapt quickly to these requests. This highlights the program’s capacity to meet community needs beyond traditional public health settings.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications to this report, to date. The children’s oral health program is managed within overall Peel Public Health’s approved cost-shared budget with the Ministry for a 70/30 split with the Region.

CONCLUSION

Many children in Peel continue to face financial, cultural and systemic barriers that impact oral health care. Promoting equitable access to dental services remains a key priority. Through dental screening, preventive services, navigation support and community engagement, the Children’s Oral Health Program will continue to deliver the Healthy Smiles Ontario program and bridge the gap between eligibility and access. Despite the introduction of the Canadian Dental Care Plan, barriers persist.

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By strengthening partnerships, expanding outreach, and launching the 2027 mobile dental clinic, the Children's Oral Health Program remains committed to providing accessible, community-based services that are delivered in a culturally sensitive manner.



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