



## Building Bright Oral Health Futures

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When most of us were growing up, dental disease was as common as scraped knees. Today advances in knowledge and preventive strategies developed over the past 30 years — from fluoridation, to dental sealants, to a simple technique like removing the bottle from a sleeping baby — have transformed the inevitable into the avoidable, virtually eliminating the pain, suffering, and diminished quality of life that oral diseases inflict.

For some children, but not all.

Access to preventive services is not universal, and full utilization of modern advances by health providers is not sufficiently widespread to assure everyone optimum oral health. The less fortunate of our children — youngsters in bordertown colonias, urban ghettos, and remote rural areas, children of color, and children with special needs — too often are bypassed and suffer dental diseases we know how to prevent. Although Medicaid covers a range of oral health services for children, a recent report from the Inspector General revealed that only 20 percent of eligible youngsters receive even a single service.<sup>1</sup> Even among the middle class, dental caries remains the most common chronic childhood disease. We have a good deal of work to do to improve this situation.

The blueprint for this work is laid out in a new publication, *Bright Futures in Practice: Oral Health*, developed under the auspices of the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau. The manual was written by a panel of pediatric dentists and edited by Paul Casamassimo, DDS, MS, and addresses the oral health needs of children within a broad set of guidelines covering five developmental periods, prenatal through adolescence.

A tool for professionals and for families, *Bright Futures in Practice: Oral Health* stresses early intervention, tells parents how to prepare for a visit to their child's dental care provider, illuminates the interlocking roles of the dental professional and the health professional, and explains risk and protective factors for caries, periodontal disease, malocclusion and injury. The guide offers instruction on risk assessment and describes measurable physical, behavioral and educational oral health outcomes that can help determine whether interventions achieve the desired results.

The oral health manual is the newest addition to a comprehensive health supervision initiative known as "Bright Futures" that HRSA launched three years ago in partnership with the Health Care Financing Administration. Bright Futures has three chief components:

• **Bright Futures: Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents**, the program's

landmark publication. This manual was issued in 1994 and focuses on total health.

• **Bright Futures in Practice**: a series of manuals providing detailed practical advice on how to implement the Bright Futures program in a community. Each manual focuses on a single issue. The series debuts with *Bright Futures in Practice: Oral Health* and follows soon with guidelines on nutrition and mental health. A companion volume, *Bright Futures for Families*, is also being developed to provide child health guidelines for parents.

• **Building Bright Futures**: a new collaborative venture for fostering partnerships between families, health professionals, and communities. Goals of *Building Bright Futures* include improving the overall health of children and families, enhancing the way health professionals practice, and increasing family participation in preventive care. Provider-family partnerships are rightfully the heart of the entire Bright Futures program, as it is within the family that health promotion evolves and that children learn and practice healthy behaviors. Partnerships are also encouraged across disciplines, linking dentists to nutritionists to nurses to physicians to social workers to teachers to dental hygienists and around again, assuring a seamless system of care. *Bright Futures* guidelines are being used in more than 250 medical and nursing schools, in hospitals and clinics, in residency training programs, by public health nurses, and in parenting education programs, and high schools. Now I invite all of you to partner with HRSA and the Bright Futures development team to assure an equally strong welcome for *Bright Futures in Practice: Oral Health*. We especially need your help in reaching out to family practitioners and other primary care providers to make dental disease prevention an essential part of prenatal and early infancy care, often long before children are seen by a dentist.

In oral health, more than in other disciplines, we have evidence that prevention works. Extending proven preventive strategies to assure every child a bright future must be our top priority.

For more information about *Bright Futures in Practice: Oral Health*, call AAPD at 312-337-2169.

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1. Children's Dental Services Under Medicaid, Access and Utilization. Washington, DC: Office of the Inspector General, US Dept. of Health and Human Services, April 1966.