

One Smile at a Time

Tonight I had the responsibility of putting my son to bed. He is almost 2. Part of the nightly routine is brushing his teeth. He will grab the toothbrush with great exuberance and put it in his mouth. He even hums to simulate the sound of my electric brush. But, alas, when it comes to plaque removal and cavity prevention, his brushing is all but ineffective. Dr. Nouryani, his dentist, advised my wife and me that we must “get in there” and brush for him to be effective. And so the nightly struggle ensues. “After two or three weeks,” Dr. Nouryani said, “he will let you brush his teeth without struggling. He’ll get used to it, and even learn to like it.” That was four months ago. He has become twice as big, twice as strong, and thus, four times more resistant. It’s a two-person job. Tonight, when I was forced to go it alone, I succumbed to his formidable defense. This brushing would have earned a C-minus grade by our professional standards. I retreated to the cushion in the corner where the evening progressed to story time and then, by God’s grace, “night-night.”

In spite of this rough night, I know my son is fortunate and so am I. We have many blessings. I have a wife and partner with whom I share all responsibilities of raising a child. We have the means to care for our son, have access to a caring pediatric dentist, toothbrushes, fluoride, and every other component of the best care for a child you could hope for. I’m sure many of our readers who have raised or are raising children have had similar sentiments. I often think about the single parent. Perhaps she is working more than one job to support and care for her children. Those kids, perhaps, do not

receive the same amount of parental or professional care and attention as my son. They may have a greater propensity for suffering from caries or other dental disease as a result, and the family may not have the resources to access the dental care to treat these diseases.

This month, many of us in the dental profession are aware of and, hopefully, are participating in Give Kids a Smile. In my mind, this has been the definitive shining star of the dental profession in the past 10 years. It has become a very visual and positive aspect of our public image. Much is publicized about the impact this program has on a global level. We will hear about how the Give Kids a Smile program increases access to dental care for a population of children who truly need it. It will serve as a springboard to send a message to policymakers that oral health is our nation’s responsibility, not the dental profession’s alone. Perhaps this year, Give Kids a Smile will spawn state and national legislative activity that will direct public resources in a way that we in the dental profession feel will best serve the oral health needs of all of our nation’s children. Regardless, we will show the very best face of the dental profession and we can all take pride in the massive coordinated effort that dentistry puts forward to improve the oral health of America’s kids.

But even as we celebrate and tout these global benefits, think for a moment about that little boy or girl in the dental chair for the first time, or the mom receiving toothbrushes for her children, perhaps their first. Behind the headlines of our profession’s



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newsletters and updates let us not forget there are individual lives that will be touched. There are parents who will come to know that there is someone, in fact an entire profession, on their side helping to look out for the oral health

of their child. There are kids who may have never been shown how to brush their teeth who will learn for the first time. They may take the memory of their experience with one of the thousands of Give Kids a Smile volunteers



Age: 2. Brushing technique: Suspect.

and keep it with them for the rest of their lives. Good oral health habits learned may be passed down to their children and their children's children. The positive effects on individual lives as a result of our efforts this February are limitless.

So whether you are a dentist, hygienist, or assistant volunteering your services, or you are the president of a multimillion dollar dental company giving one of those oversized checks to a dental association president (can you really cash those things?), don't look too far beyond the face of the little boy or girl in the dental chair you are helping. And don't let February or the boundaries of the Give Kids a Smile program limit our efforts to help those who need a little extra help. Their oral health will need attention 365 days out of the year.

As my son sleeps now, I hope for a better tooth brushing experience tomorrow. At the end of the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, Morgan Freeman's character walks along a beach in Mexico, savoring his newfound freedom and, also, reflecting on hope. His words are simple, elegant, profound. In this spirit, I hope that the profession of dentistry can be a central force in solving the oral health care challenges facing this nation and the world. I hope that Give Kids a Smile will serve as an impetus for the leaders of our profession to shape public policy in a way that forces the oral health care needs of our nation's children to become a forethought, not an afterthought of policy decision makers. And I hope we all experience the joyous and satisfying feeling that we have touched and indeed, improved the individual lives of many needy children and their parents, one smile at a time. **CDA**