Children benefit from dental lessons

BY ANNE WITHERS
Contributing Writer

Where do you find puppets, play dough and healthy smiles? In child care programs using Cavity Free Kids, a dental health curriculum for preschool children. Cavity Free Kids uses evidence-based dental science and developmentally appropriate activities to promote healthy oral health habits.

The Child Development Council recently received a grant from the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York, to teach the Cavity Free Kids curriculum to child care providers, home visitors and trainers in Cortland, Tompkins, Onondaga, Oneida, Herkimer and Madison Counties. The Health Foundation will also be providing toothbrushes, toothpaste and other supplies for the programs using the curriculum.

Why teach preschool children about dental health? In Cortland County 50 percent of third grade children have experienced cavities. Our local Head Start programs report that about 50 percent of their pre-school children already need dental treatment. Early childhood cavities are preventable. Oral health is a part of overall health. When children are not healthy, it affects their ability to develop, learn, and thrive. Poor oral health can lead to pain, attention problems, delayed social development, sleep deprivation, poor nutrition and missed school days.

Cavity Free Kids is organized around five Basics of Oral Health:
1. Baby Teeth Are Important!
2. Water for Thirst
3. Tooth Healthy Foods
4. Brush, Floss, Swish
5. Going to the Dentist

Each section includes facts for the child care providers, information sheets for parents, lots of developmentally appropriate activities, songs, etc., that cover all of the learning domains including: logic, language, math, science, social studies, creative arts, physical development and health, and social and emotional development.

The curriculum also includes some colorful materials that can be copied. All of this plus ongoing support with toothbrushes, toothpaste and technical assistance, is free to the child care providers. Here are some comments heard from child care providers who are using the Cavity Free Kids curriculum:

"I've noticed a big difference in the six months we've been using the curriculum. There is a lot of interest in teeth. All of the children are looking at foods differently. They love to repeat the activities and they have lots of questions."

"I feel the CFK curriculum will benefit my class and I intend to incorporate CFK's activities, as well as tooth brushing, into our routines."

"Two children went to the dentist this month!"

Anne Withers is a program director at the Child Development Council located in Cortland.