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Moving the Needle on the #1 Chronic Disease of Childhood

Evaluation results of Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation's *Cavities Get Around* campaign reveal steep drop in juice consumption among children

JANUARY 7, 2016 – Denver, CO – The results of a new study by Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation demonstrate the effectiveness of the bilingual *Cavities Get Around* campaign in the effort to prevent tooth decay, the #1 chronic disease of childhood and a “[silent epidemic](#).”

The study, conducted by HealthCare Research, Inc., was given to 600 low-income families in English and Spanish across Colorado, and shows significant progress toward improving child oral health by *reducing* consumption of juices and juice drinks—which have cavity-causing sugar—and *increasing* intake of water.

[State of Colorado child oral health statistics](#) show tooth decay affects 40% of kindergartners and 55% of third-graders, hitting Hispanic children and kids from low-income families especially hard. Launched in August 2014, Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation's *Cavities Get Around* is part of a “public will building” initiative and is the first of its kind in Colorado, deploying mass media, grassroots outreach, policy and partnerships to prevent early childhood tooth decay.

“Tooth decay in young children is often caused by too much sugar, particularly from sugary drinks that are sipped throughout the day,” said pediatric dentist Scott Hamilton, DDS, clinical instructor at Children's Hospital Colorado's Cavity Free at Three Clinic. “Tooth decay is a significant problem, causing pain, hampering speech development and disrupting sleep—even spreading to adult teeth as they come in. Unfortunately, extraction of severely infected baby teeth is all too common—a painful procedure often requiring the child to be placed under general anesthesia. This shouldn't happen because tooth decay in kids can be prevented.”

A key way to protect baby teeth from decay is limiting consumption of sugary drinks like juice—which can have as much sugar as soda and lacks the fiber of whole fruit—and making sure children drink only water between meals and at bedtime. These are steps that can be taken not only in the home but also in childcare centers, schools, community venues and public policy.

According to the study:

- 63% of respondents said their children regularly drink tap water, a 22-point increase from 2014. Most tap water in Colorado has fluoride, which helps prevent tooth decay.
- The perception of juice as a healthy beverage for young children declined dramatically; 43% of respondents considered juice to be important to their child's health and nutritional needs this year—down 29 points since 2014.

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- Juice consumption among young children is down 19 percentage points from 66% in 2014 to 47% today.
- The percentage of parents who considered baby teeth “less important” than adult teeth decreased significantly—from 21% in 2014 to 15% today.

“Many people think of cavities in children’s teeth as not that big of a problem. But for some kids, especially those from underserved communities where access to care can be limited, it’s a very big problem,” said Wyatt Hornsby, campaign director at Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation. “Poor oral health can set children up for a lifelong struggle. It’s hard to form words, focus in school, sleep and play when you’re in pain, as many Colorado kids are today. That’s why we’re focusing on one of the root causes of tooth decay in kids: sugar. Our research has shown that juices and juice drinks are major sources of sugar for many children. Water, on the hand, helps protect a child’s teeth from decay when it’s from the tap and has fluoride.”

Barbara Springer, executive director of Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation, said: “With child oral health getting recognition as one of the state’s [10 Winnable Battles](#), and with increasing awareness of sugar’s negative impacts on health, it’s the right time for this work. But we also know there’s much work to be done because early childhood tooth decay is a serious problem.”

Cavities Get Around continues to evolve and strengthen its model. The campaign initially focused on raising awareness of the impacts of juice and other sugary drinks on child oral health. Over time, it has broadened to include community organizing, promotores and policy change. Extensive target audience research has informed campaign messaging and strategy.

Current campaign partners include Bright By Three, Children’s Hospital Colorado, Children’s Museum of Denver, Healthier Colorado, Oral Health Colorado, Qualistar Colorado, Southeastern Colorado Area Health Education Center, and Westwood Unidos.

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About the Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation

The Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation’s mission is to improve Colorado’s oral health by eradicating childhood tooth decay. We strive to create innovative programs with measurable results. In the last decade, we’ve worked to understand the oral health needs of our state and supported opportunities to provide needed services. We maintain a passionate belief that, because oral disease is largely preventable, the work we are doing will result in a more healthy Colorado community.