

Policy on School Absences for Dental Appointments

Originating Council

Council on Clinical Affairs

Adopted

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Purpose

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recognizes dental care as medically necessary and that poor oral health can negatively affect a child's ability to learn. This policy is intended to assist public health and school education administrators in developing enlightened policies on school absence for dental appointments. It also is intended to assist parents in making informed decisions.

Methods

This policy is based on a review of current dental, medical, educational, and public health literature and state statutes and regulations related to student absence for dental appointments. An electronic search was conducted using the search parameters: Terms: "school absences for dental appointments", "excused school absences", and "department of education"; Fields: all fields; Limits: within the last 10 years, humans, English. Eight hundred forty-one articles matched these criteria. Papers for review were chosen from this list and from references within selected articles. When data did not appear sufficient or were inconclusive, recommendations were based on expert and/or consensus opinion by experienced researchers and clinicians. It is beyond the scope of this document to review every state statute and regulation on absences from school for dental appointments.

Background

Oral health is integral to general health. Oral conditions can interfere with eating and adequate nutritional intake, speaking, self-esteem, and daily activities.¹ Dental care is medically necessary to prevent and eliminate orofacial disease, infection, and pain. It is also important to restore the form and function of the dentition and correct facial disfigurement or dysfunction.² The public's lack of awareness of the importance of oral health is a major barrier to dental care.³ Unrecognized disease and postponed care result in exacerbated problems, which lead to more extensive and costly treatment needs.²

The National Association of State Boards of Education recognizes "health and success in schools are interrelated. Schools cannot achieve their primary mission of education if students and staff are not healthy and fit physically, mentally, and socially".⁴ Children with dental pain may be irritable, withdrawn, or unable to concentrate. Pain can affect test

performance as well as school attendance.³ Left untreated, the pain and infection caused by tooth decay can lead to problems in eating, speaking, and learning.⁵ In 1996, students aged 5 to 17 years missed an average of 3.1 days/100 students due to acute dental problems.¹ When these problems are treated and children no longer are experiencing pain, their learning and school attendance improve.¹

According to the US Surgeon General, "a national public health plan for oral health does not exist".³ This corresponds with the fact that there is no national policy on excused absences from school for dental appointments. Some states (eg, California, Texas) have very specific laws excusing students for dental appointments.^{6,7} Other state laws are more general and recognize absences due to doctor's appointments or illness.^{8,9}

Policy statement

Dental care is medically necessary and oral health is integral to general health. Undiagnosed and untreated oral conditions may interfere with a child's ability to eat, sleep, or function well at home or at school due to discomfort or pain. The unesthetic nature of caries and dental malocclusion may compromise a child's self-esteem and social development. Schools' policies that prevent or discourage legitimate school absence for the purpose of delivery of vital health care services may cause harm to their students.

Children who have their dental conditions corrected improve learning and attendance in school. State laws and local school district policies are not uniform on absences from school for dental appointments. A uniform policy that recognizes the negative effect of chronic truancy on academic performance would be useful. Such policies should not restrict necessary health care delivery.

The AAPD:

1. Supports state law or school policy that allows the absence for legitimate healthcare delivery, including that of oral health services.
2. Encourages parents, school administrators, and dentists to work together to ensure that children receive dental care while minimizing school absences.

References

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