

## State to require toothbrushing at daycares, preschools

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In addition to leading counting games and coloring time, many day care providers will have a new task come January: herding their youngsters into group toothbrushing sessions.

Citing evidence of early decay in children's mouths, the state plans to require nursery schools, pre-schools and other licensed day care providers to give dental care lessons and supervise cleaning if their charges are there for more than four hours a day or eat a meal.

When asked about the Department of Early Education and Care plan, area day care providers offered a mixed response, with some saying that implementation should not present a problem and others pointing to worries about logistics like storage and sanitation.

"It's going to take a little more than just adding a toothbrush to the environment," said Melissa Boucher, a staff member and parent at Mountainside Children's Center in Framingham.

Boucher said she also doesn't believe that day care providers should be given oral hygiene responsibilities and that other customers agree with her sentiment.

"Our job here is to care for children safely and not to take over the roles parents can do at home," she said.

A 2007 survey found that more than one in four Massachusetts kindergarteners roughly 19,000 children - showed signs of dental decay, with 10,000 of those cases untreated.

The problem was more pronounced among minority and low-income students but still found across the state, said the Catalyst Institute, a Westborough oral health research group now called DentaQuest that is partially funded by the Delta Dental insurance company.

While children eventually lose their initial teeth, cavity-causing bacteria can remain. The Catalyst study cited the problems that interim and continued cavities, pain and infections can have on health, eating, speech and learning.

Early Education and Care also wants to establish lifelong dental care habits at a young age, department Commissioner Sherri Killins said.

"There's a science and a set of evidence behind each of the decisions we've made," she said.

Parents can opt out of the new initiative by signing a waiver, and centers meeting the threshold (four hours or more or serving a meal) just during school vacations are exempted. Otherwise, day care providers will wipe infants' gums with clean, damp cloths and supervise toothbrushing for older children, with existing licensing inspectors checking compliance.

Boucher, however, voiced staff worries about adding another challenge to the center's germ control efforts, one that would require a new sanitation system unlikely to include the state's mandated bleach-and-water cleaning mix for surfaces.

"That's actually quite a process," she said.

But at Just a Wee Day Care Center in Ashland, Director Ellen Patete said the oral hygiene regulation reinforces parental cajoling and did not seem difficult to introduce.

"As far as we're concerned, it's not a big deal," she said. "It's going to benefit the kids."

At Rise and Shine Academy in Milford, children already brush their teeth, part of the center's successful effort to earn accreditation from The National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Director Margaret Eaton said the children enjoy the activity, with each toothbrush stored in a separate pocket where air can circulate and toothpaste placed on paper plates to avoid tube contamination.

"We haven't had any problems at all," she said.

Killins and her department point to successful toothbrushing initiatives through Head Start and at a pilot program in Springfield, with the expectation that toothbrushes this time will come from centers or parents. The department advises replacing the toothbrushes every three months or after illness, with recommended labels indicating ownership and date of issue.

The department also plans to offer training sessions and an online curriculum.

While she is still waiting for guidance, Kay Byram, the director of the Framingham Centre Nursery School, said Early Education and Care was usually reliable.

"The state doesn't just throw you to the wolves," she said.

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