



DENTAL ACCESS RATES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN LOW IN EVERY LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA IN ENGLAND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Researchers at Birmingham have analysed NHS dental data to look at rates of dental attendance by very young children, finding that these were very low – **only 3% of children had visited a dentist before their first birthday and only 12% by their second.**
- Surprisingly, the rates were low even for relatively affluent areas.
- This suggests that there is a widespread misunderstanding of the importance of taking children to the dentist before their first birthday. Our findings emphasise how important are initiatives to encourage all parents and carers to take their children to the dentist. Initiatives such as Starting Well are also likely to be important to help children at high risk of dental disease.

Introduction

Despite significant reductions in levels of tooth decay in England over the past 40 years, the proportion of children suffering this preventable disease remains high with a quarter of five-year-old children in England overall and a third of children in the North West (Public Health England 2019).

There is good scientific evidence that public health measures such as water fluoridation and supervised tooth brushing can reduce levels of tooth decay at a population level. Children should also be taken to the dentist so that they can receive personalised prevention and their parents/carers can be supported in keeping their children's teeth free of decay. Children from deprived communities are less likely to be taken to the dentist, even though they are at higher risk of decay.

There is a national ambition to ensure all children visit a dentist before their first birthday and an in-

itiative called Dental Check By One was launched by the British Society of Paediatric Dentistry in 2017 which has been endorsed by the Chief Dental Officer.

Levels of child dental attendance

To assess how far England is from achieving this aim, we looked at NHS dental statistics for child attendance for the year to June 2017 and produced figures for each upper tier and unitary authority.

We found that rates of dental attendance by very young children were very low – only 3% of children in England had visited a dentist before their first birthday. There was some variation between local authorities, but only in two was the rate greater than 10% (Tameside 11%; South Tyneside 12%).

We also looked at children who were under the age of 2 years and found a similar picture with only 12% having visited a dentist. Again there was some variation between local authorities; only in two was the rate greater than 25% (Tameside 27%; South Tyneside 38%).

We had expected to see higher levels of attendance in more affluent local authorities but this was not the case. We explored with private dentistry providers whether children were being seen privately instead but this does not seem to be the explanation.

Our findings have just been published in the journal *Community Dental Health* (Salomon Ibarra CC, Ravagi V, Hill K, Jones CM, Landes DP, Morris AJ. Low rates of dental attendance by the age of one and inequality between local government administrative areas in England. *Community*

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Dental Health 2019 doi: 10.1922/CDH_4390Salomon-Ibarra05).

Figures for year to June 2018 subsequently became available and we repeated the analysis, finding the picture unchanged with 3% of children having visited a dentist before their first birthday and 13% by their second.

This suggests that there is a widespread misunderstanding of the importance of taking children to the dentist before their first birthday. Our findings emphasise the importance of initiatives to encourage parents and carers to take young children to the dentist. Initiatives such as Starting Well are also likely to be important to help children at high risk of dental disease.

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