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Poor Oral Health Can Hurt Grades

When your child isn't feeling well, it can be hard for them to do their best in school. Poor oral health can have the same effect. One main reason is that poor oral health often causes pain, whether it's an aching tooth or sore gums. And focusing on schoolwork (or anything!) can be next to impossible if you are in pain.

The effects of tooth decay

In addition to interfering with concentration, poor oral health can affect your child's ability to learn in other ways:

- Early tooth loss can interfere with speech development and result in failure to thrive.
- Oral health problems can reduce appetite or make eating difficult. Not eating enough or eating a limited diet can result in poor nutrition. Poor nutrition can affect a child's ability to concentrate and perform complex tasks.
- Dental pain can cause anxiety, fatigue, irritability, and withdrawal. All of these can affect a child's ability to learn. They can also make it hard to make friends, which is a key part of early development.

Although this may not seem like a big or common problem, it is. According to 2015 data, 50 percent of 3rd graders in Minnesota experienced dental decay and 20 percent had untreated cavities. Children with poor oral health are nearly 3 times as likely as their classmates to miss school as a result of dental pain. These absences result in poorer school performance.

Getting dental care at school

- Your child may be able to get their preventive dental services at school.
- This can take place during the normal school day or during a Head Start or pre-school program.
- Several dental providers are now able to bring hygienists, dental assistants, and even dentists to your child's school to provide your child education on the importance of taking care of their teeth.
- They may also be able to provide a dental exam, cleaning, and apply fluoride varnish right there at the school, where your child is in their normal and comfortable environment.

Oral health tips

- **Help your child get the most out of school:** Make sure your child brushes their teeth twice a day for 2 minutes and flosses at least once a day.
- **Avoid sugary snacks and snacking between meals.**
- **Make sure your child sees a dentist regularly!** Regular visits can help prevent problems, and your dentist can recommend the best course of action if problems do develop. If you need help finding a dentist, call PrimeWest Health Member Services at **1-866-431-0801** or TTY **1-800-627-3529** or **711**. The call is free.

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Sources: National Maternal & Child Oral Health Resource Center, Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Oral Health Program, and National Center for Biotechnology Information

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1-866-431-0801 (toll free); TTY **1-800-627-3529** or **711**

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