

Researchers hope to improve dental health by changing caregiver's behavior

May 4 2015

Studies have long associated low-income areas with poor oral health. But dental researchers at Case Western Reserve University and University of Washington sensed that other factors related to income may be at work—in particular, education level.

So they recently investigated how a parent or other caregiver's education level and dental habits affect [children's](#) dental health.

With data from 423 low-income African-American kindergarteners and their caregivers from a CWRU dental school study in 2007, researchers tested the hypothesis that a caregiver's education level influences how often they and their children brush their teeth and visit the dentist for routine checkups, and how those habits result in decayed or filled teeth.

The results supported the hypothesis:

- Caregivers who completed [high school](#) were 1.76 times more likely to visit the dentist, compared with those who did not graduate high school.
- The children of caregivers with high school diplomas were nearly six times more likely to visit the dentist routinely.
- Children who visited the dentist regularly had about one-fourth as many untreated cavities as those who didn't.
- The [education level](#) of caregivers was directly associated with about a third fewer untreated decayed teeth, and 28 percent fewer decayed or filled teeth among the children they cared for.

The findings, reported in the *Caries Research* article, "Caregiver's Education Level and Children Dental Caries in African Americans: A Path Analytic Study," confirm the role of caregiver education in child dental decay and indicate that the caregiver's behavior influences a child's [oral health](#) habits.

As a result, researchers hope to encourage parents to become better role models for their children, who pick up on both the positive and negative habits of their caregivers. In the past, improving oral health has focused on educating children about good dental habits. The research team has provided children in the study with dental examinations, tooth sealants, toothbrushes and toothpaste. Children also received lessons on proper care of their teeth.

When dental problems were found during annual exams, letters were sent to parents to tell them their children needed follow-up dental care. But not all [caregivers](#) sought help for their children, Heima said.

And nearly 100 of the study's participants—with or without a high school education—did not seek routine [dental care](#) at least once a year.

So it was clear the message wasn't getting through.

"Changing their ways with literature and instructions, didn't always work," said Masahiro Heima, a pediatric dentist and faculty member at Case Western Reserve School of Dental Medicine. "So we need to focus on behavioral changes."

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

Citation: Researchers hope to improve dental health by changing caregiver's behavior (2015, May 4) retrieved 19 November 2023 from

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