

Press release – embargoed until 00.00hrs 18th March 2026

20th March 2026

World Oral Health Day - A Happy Mouth is... A Happy Life".

Today, on World Oral Health Day the Association of British Paediatric Nurses emphasises the importance of oral health for children and young people's wellbeing and focus on actions nurses can take to promote preventative care to avoid tooth decay.

Dental caries is preventable by brushing teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste, reducing sugary foods and drinks, and attending regular dental check-ups.

The level of tooth decay amongst children and young people today across the UK is seen as a key public health issue.

In England, there were **21,162** hospital admissions for tooth decay among children aged 5 to 9 in 2024/2025, making it the leading cause of admission for that age group¹. Decay levels in 5-year-olds in Northern Ireland is higher than in England². The leading cause of planned hospital admissions for children under 11 in Northern Ireland is tooth decay, with over 4,000 extractions per year. Over the past five years, there have been around **104,133** admissions for tooth decay in children across the UK³.

Although dental decay continues to be a significant public health issue for children in Scotland there have been improvements since 2000's because of targeted initiatives. There is a strong link between dental decay and deprivation, with those children eligible for free school meals more likely to have tooth decay.

Preventative measures including supervised toothbrushing schemes and targeted oral health improvement programs such as 'Childsmile', 'Designed to Smile' and 'Happy Smiles' for pre-school children in the most deprived areas. In some areas such as the Isle of Man primary school children are being offered fluoride varnish to be applied to prevent toothdecay.

¹ <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/news-and-events/media-centre/press-releases/dental-stats-sept-25/>

² [https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-ndep-oral-health-survey.PDF#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20experience%20of%20dental%20decay,in%20the%20Western%20HSCT%20area%20\(Figure%201\).](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-ndep-oral-health-survey.PDF#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20experience%20of%20dental%20decay,in%20the%20Western%20HSCT%20area%20(Figure%201).)

³ <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/is-poor-dental-health-in-children-equally-common-across-england>

The ABPN believes that

- Every child and young person has a right to have their specific needs recognised and addressed^{4,5}
- Infants, children and young people should receive care from nurses that have the child specific knowledge, skills and competencies to meet their unique needs in age-appropriate facilities, at home, at school or closer to home in community and general practice settings⁶
- Child field specific pre-registration undergraduate education programmes, as well as specific post registration education is crucial to equip nurses to meet the needs of children and young people across all settings, including at school, at home or closer to home in community and general practice settings^{7,8}
- All nurses who come into contact with babies, children and young people should make every contact count, providing concise advice around healthy lifestyles, physical activity, smoking cessation, healthy eating and mental wellbeing, as well as tooth brushing, vaccinations and screening programmes.

The Association of British Paediatric Nurses calls on the Government to invest further in oral health improvement programmes in pre-school and school settings, with a particular focus in the most deprived areas across the UK.

“Poor oral health is a global problem. Oral health is too easily overlooked and often seen as other people’s responsibility. However, we all have a role to play in promoting oral health. Poor oral health can result in children experiencing pain, speech impairments, and difficulty eating, Children can also experience psychosocial and quality of life impacts such as poor self-esteem and the potential trauma associated with tooth extraction for dental caries. Poor oral health in childhood can continue to have adverse effects throughout childhood and into adulthood. As nurses working directly or indirectly with children and their families, we need to ensure that children’s oral health is taken seriously so that they can grow up without experiencing the myriad of issues related to poor oral health”.

Professor Bernie Carter, President

⁴ See ABPN Position statement on Children and Young People’s rights [abpn_position_statement_children_and_young_peoples_rights.pdf](#) and ABPN Background briefing on Children and Young People’s Rights [abpn_background_briefing_children_and_young_people.pdf](#)

⁵ UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948 see <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/>

⁶ See ABPN Position statement on Workforce planning and nurse staffing [abpn_position_statement_workforce_planning_and_nurse_staffing-final_nov_2024.docx](#) and ABPN Background briefing on workforce planning and nurse staffing [abpn_workforce_planning_and_nurse_staffing_background_briefing_paper-final_nov_2024.docx](#)

⁷ See ABPN Position Statement on Children’s Nurse Education [abpn_position_statement_nurse_education_final_24_november_2024.pdf](#)

⁸ See ABPN Background Paper on Children’s Nurse Education [abpn_cn_education_background_paper_final_22nd_november_2024.pdf](#)

Notes for editors

The term child refers to infants, children, young people and young adults up to 25 years of age

The ABPN recognises that primary and community services, as well as child public health and mental health services, including school nurses and health visitors also have a key role in supporting children, young people and families.

The ABPN is the oldest children's nursing association in the world, established in 1938. Our wide membership includes experts in clinical practice, education, leadership and research.

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