

Lifelong journey in oral health services



Preschool



Parent asked by nurse to enrol baby with dental service at 5 month health check

Parent fills in enrolment form and provides proof of eligibility

Parent shown how to clean baby's teeth by nurse

Parent told by nurse that baby teeth are important, told to avoid sugary drinks

Parent sent invite to baby dental appointment by provider closest to home

Parent may take child to appointments

Early childhood provider runs oral health education

Or

Baby not enrolled in dental service

Parent unsure about need and cost of dental care for baby

Child has some tooth decay, goes to dentist or hospital

Dentist shows parent and child how to clean teeth

Dentist encourages regular appointments for prevention and early intervention



At School



Enrolment form sent home when child starts school. Parent fills in enrolment and provides proof of eligibility and consent forms

Child gets a school notice about dental services available (bus, on-site clinic, off-site clinic)

Parent gets appointment letter and call for child

Arranges time off work and transport - takes child to appointment (or child unaccompanied)

Child (and parent) told how to look after teeth by dental therapist

Child told they need treatment. Parent asked to consent to treatment

Child given regular dental appointments for prevention and early intervention - likely to attend

Parent and school remind child to attend

At year 9 - adolescents given a new dental provider (private practice or mobile bus), or can choose another provider

Adolescent given regular dental appointments and reminders - may or may not attend

Dentist tells them how to look after teeth

Adolescent leaves service at 18 believing their teeth are 'fixed'



Over 18

Believe they no longer need regular dental care

Seeking event-based care only (for pain or damage)

Unlikely to see dentist regularly - little understanding of going for regular checks to prevent serious problems (or that decay is present long before pain occurs)

May go to a doctor or hospital for emergency pain relief. Told to see a dentist

Worried about cost and pain

Unsure how to find a dentist

Have babies of their own

Teeth get really bad and affect ability to eat healthy foods

Dental treatment is mainly tooth removal



Lifelong journey in oral health services

Good oral health requires daily care at home and regular checks for decay and disease by a dentist or dental therapist. This oral health journey is presented as a lifelong journey because it is important to look after your teeth every day of your life. It also highlights the transition points in this journey that create the biggest challenges from a health literacy perspective – such as pre-school enrolment, transferring from child to adolescent services and leaving the (free) service to join (or not) private care.

While at school, access to oral health services is usually regular and managed or driven by the service providers. Appointments are made for a child, they are reminded to attend and attend during school time. However before starting school, despite the service being free, parents seem unclear about why and how to access services. Parents are sometimes unaware of the long-term importance of healthy baby-teeth.

Adolescents are less likely to visit a provider regularly, either because they don't have one (as they have not enrolled with a provider) or because they don't use the provider they have been allocated. Adolescents seem to leave the service aware of how to care for their teeth at home but unsure about when and why to see a dentist in the future. Many believe they should only be seeking event-based care, such as when they experience pain or damage their teeth.

The lifelong journey demonstrates the opportunities to build understanding of when and why to seek regular dental services, to help prevent significant decay and receive timely treatment which is less expensive and leads to fewer dental and health problems. The lifelong journey also demonstrates that primary care (nurses) talk about teeth with pre-schoolers and parents but few people talk with their doctor about their teeth.