

# A bright idea to provide dental homes to our youngest, most vulnerable patients

*Points of Light project connects primary care physicians, dentists and parents in communities*

by CRAIG S. HOLLANDER DDS, MS

**B**y the time you read this, I will be starting my twentieth year in private practice. Although I don't feel my career is halfway done, it probably is. Will I be slowing down? Not for a while. I enjoy what I do, and childhood dental decay is not disappearing from our community. In fact, the CDC published a report a couple of years ago that stated the only age group in which dental disease is on the rise is in the 2- to 5-year-old category! Great job security for a pediatric dentist, but should this statistic need to continue?

I am still a true believer that if parents bring their kids for an initial screening/examination before the second primary molars are in, that child has a good chance of growing up cavity-free. After all, if the caregiver at that first appointment finds out that they need to get the bottle out of the crib or start brushing their kid's teeth, the oral health should improve, right? The problem is that there are not enough pediatric dentists to provide care for all children, and a majority of general dentists are not willing to see infants for that age 1 visit.

The Missouri Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (MoAPD) and the Missouri Dental Association (MDA) sent a survey out recently to all the MDA general dentists in order to determine what percentage were seeing kids under the age of 3. Of those who responded:

- 81 percent currently are seeing kids age 3 and younger in their practices
- Of these, 39 percent currently are seeing kids age 1
- The remaining 61 percent were split evenly, with 20 percent starting to see kids at age 2, 21 percent seeing kids at age 3 and 19 percent waiting until the kids were older
- The prevalence of individuals who were not seeing kids younger than age 3 said they were either never trained, or they did not want to treat cavities in young children
- 64 percent of respondents learned how to perform a dental screening on a child

age 3 and younger in dental school or advanced education and 87 percent of this group sees children younger than 3 in their practices

So, how can we bridge the gap for these 61 percent of dentists who aren't seeing children by age 1, but could be providing a dental home? A project called Points of Light may be the catalyst.



The Points of Light (POL) project was started in Michigan in 2004 by Dr. Kevin Hale, a Michigan pediatric dentist. This project helps primary health care providers find dental care for young children. Eight communities were recruited to implement the POL model because they had energetic dentists who were seeing kids for an age 1 visit. There are now 55 communities that have become a POL. With the help of the MoAPD membership, I am bringing Points of Light to Missouri in order to participate in this project and make our state glow as well.

## FOR DOCTORS ALREADY PROVIDING A DENTAL HOME FOR 1 YEAR OLDS

Pediatric and general dentists who currently are seeing 1 year olds for lap exams can sign up for the list at [www.pointsoflightonline.org](http://www.pointsoflightonline.org). This website will list you as a "Point of Light" provider in your community, listed by zip code. Once Missouri establishes this new network of pediatric and general dentists, pediatricians and family practitioners in your area will encourage parents of infants and toddlers to go on the POL website and enter their zip code to find a dental provider who sees 1 year old patients.

Don't worry about having to treat decay that you are not prepared to. The pediatric dentists will be on the list, too, and still will be a resource for you to refer kids in need of further treatment. This collaborative effort between pediatric dentists, general dentists and our colleagues in medicine will provide dental homes for babies in order to prevent the onset of dental caries. Put yourself in the spotlight and become a Point of Light provider.

## FOR DOCTORS NOT SEEING KIDS UNTIL AT LEAST AGE 3

Are you working as hard as you want to be working? Would you like to open up your practice to a population of patients you are not currently seeing? Everyone has the skills to look in a baby's mouth and identify the risks for developing cavities. You may feel uncomfortable at first, it may be noisy, but we all know how to "count teeth." An infant seen in your practice for their first visit can be literally a patient for

life. You can start seeing the kids and counseling the parents on feeding and brushing habits before problems happen so they won't have dental restorative needs later.

It is time to start thinking about prevention, instead of waiting for cavities to occur. Problems detected early will be easier and less expensive to treat. An infant exam in your office won't take more than 10 or 15 minutes of your office time. Most of the time could be spent by your assistant or hygienist interviewing the parent about the child's oral health habits at home, and the last five minutes of the appointment is spent with the dentist looking in the infant's mouth and explaining the findings to the parent.

I hope you take time to consider this decision for your practice and not be left off the Points of Light list. Pediatricians will be provided with POL pamphlets and posters for their office, and parents will be directed to the POL website to see who in their area is seeing 1 year olds for dental examinations. Please take a few moments to go to Professional Resource page on the Points of Light website [www.pointsoflightonline.org](http://www.pointsoflightonline.org). Under educational videos you will find short clips on the knee-to-

knee lap exam, infant oral hygiene, what to look for in an infant screening and more. There are other resources to help you start an infant oral health program in your office. The MoAPD has a parent questionnaire you can use in your office to establish the infant's caries risk assessment. Email me and I will be glad to send it to you.

There are 114 counties in Missouri but only 61 pediatric dentists in the entire state. General dentists are needed to see very young patients to determine which ones are most at-risk for dental disease and to implement caries preventive measures which can avoid the need for specialty intervention. Whether you already are seeing kids at age one, or have never done so in the past but would consider adding these new patients to your practice, sign up now at the Points of Light website.

You can become a beacon of hope for kids who are not seeing the dentist until they already have dental decay. It is my hope that you will elect to participate in the growing movement to provide a dental home to our youngest and most vulnerable patients. 📍



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## 2011 CDHM Art Contest Winners

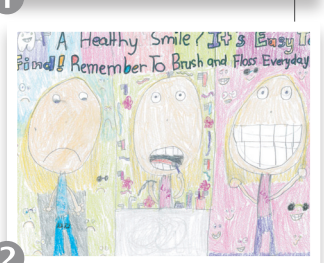
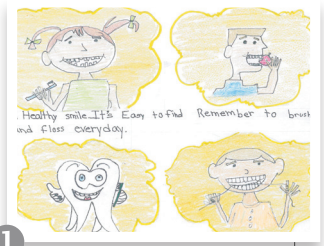
The MDA Foundation once again hosted its Children's Dental Health Month art contest that asked second graders across Missouri to enter drawings depicting this year's theme "A Healthy Smile? It's Easy to Find!"

Teachers at individual schools chose an overall winner from the second grade classes and then submitted it for judging by the MDA Foundation Board. Participating teachers also are asked to discuss dental health in the classroom as part of the contest. This year's winners were:

- First Place: Dana Abdulabi, a student at Al-Salam Day School in Ballwin
- Second Place: Elizabeth Martin, a student at Trinity Lutheran School in Freistatt
- Third Place: Kimber Penland, a student at South Holt R-1 School in Oregon

These winning entries garnered prizes for the individual students and also for each classmate. In addition, the first place entry received a prize for the teachers and \$200 cash donation to the school.

"Children's oral health is so important to their overall health," said Dr. Joel Pratt, MDA Foundation president. "A contest like this helps make learning about oral health something fun and interesting, and we hope it also creates life-long good oral health habits."



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