



## **Ring in the New School Year the Right Way**

### *Top five best back-to-school oral health practices*

It may seem like a mindless matter, but packing an apple instead of a sugary snack in a child's lunch this fall can help improve oral health and educational performance. After all, children eat more than 20 percent of their meals at school during the academic year.

"Kids should be focused on learning, not on being hungry or feeling tired and sluggish all afternoon" said Dr. Katina Morelli, dental director, Delta Dental of Illinois. "Try to limit high sugar drinks and snacks, which are bad for the teeth as well as the rest of the body."

It is no real surprise that children in America (especially those from lower income families) suffer from poor nutritional habits. A report from the USDA Economic Research Service claimed that the average child under the age of 12 consumes 49 pounds of sugar per year!

Overconsumption of sugar harms a child's oral *and* overall health. Snacks like cookies, candy and chewy fruit snacks mix with bacteria in the sticky plaque that constantly forms on teeth to generate acid, which can wear away enamel and cause tooth decay. While sweets may provide a temporary jolt for kids, that sugar rush soon turns into a crash and kids are left feeling lethargic. That is not the kind of mental state kids need to prepare for an afternoon of classes.

Instead, Delta Dental of Illinois recommends these top five oral health best practices:

- After breakfast, before leaving for school, make sure your child brushes well with fluoridated toothpaste. Brushing immediately following a meal helps clean teeth and eliminates halitosis (bad breath).
- Fill a child's lunch box with healthy lunch food and snacks such as lean meats, whole grain breads, low-fat yogurt or cheeses, apples, bite-size carrots and baked chips or whole-grain crackers. Besides being packed with nutrients, certain fruits and veggies can even help clean the teeth and gums. Make treats a treat. Serve sugary, sticky snacks like cookies, cake, brownies and candy only in moderation. Room parents should discuss bringing in healthy snacks along with sugary treats for birthdays and other classroom parties.
- If a child chews gum and the school allows it, chewing sugar-free gum for a few minutes in between lunch and afternoon classes can help stimulate saliva to buffer the acid and help dislodge food particles from the mouth. Gum containing the natural sweetener, Xylitol, is a particularly good option since studies have shown that consistent exposure to Xylitol can reduce cavity-causing bacteria in the mouth.

- If a child has braces, have them brush or rinse well with water after lunch. If a child wears a removable retainer, they should clean it well after each meal and rinse their mouth.
- Before the school year starts, schedule a dental visit to make sure there are no problems to distract a child during the school year. Ask the dentist about sealants as a way to protect children's teeth from cavities. Sealants – a thin coating of bonding material applied over the chewing surface of molar teeth – act as a barrier to cavity-causing bacteria.

Learn more about taking care of children's oral health and your oral health at [www.mouthmattersil.com](http://www.mouthmattersil.com).

**Don't forget to pledge to help local children through "Dentist By 1"**

The Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation launched the "Dentist By 1" public service campaign earlier this year to educate parents about the benefits of taking their children to the dentist by age 1.

As part of the campaign, Illinois parents and caregivers can help local, underprivileged children. For each person who pledges to take their child to the dentist by age 1, or to regular dental visits for older children, at [www.DentistBy1.com](http://www.DentistBy1.com), the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation will donate an oral health kit, with a toothbrush, toothpaste and floss, to a local children's charitable organization. Parents who pledge will also receive a kit. Pledges can be made until Oct. 31, 2012.

For more information about the importance of visiting the dentist by age 1 and tips on establishing good oral health habits for a lifetime of healthy smiles, visit [www.DentistBy1.com](http://www.DentistBy1.com) or "like" Delta Dental of Illinois on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/DeltaDentallL](http://www.facebook.com/DeltaDentallL).