

## Bringing Dental Care To Kids

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MIDDLETOWN -- Seven-year-old Jamie Bonaparte walked into a small room just off the front lobby of Lawrence Elementary School, slid into a dentist's chair, slipped on a pair of protective sunglasses and opened wide.

The lanky second-grader in the LeBron James T-shirt was the morning's first patient in this makeshift dental office. He had come the day before for a cleaning and now was back so that hygienist SallyAnn Waitowitz could apply protective sealant to his molars to prevent decay.

Waitowitz, wearing an aqua shirt covered with cheery pink and purple fish clutching toothbrushes, murmured words of encouragement to the boy in the chair. "You're doing great," she said.

Jamie was one of nine youngsters to visit the mobile dental unit during its two-day stop this week at Lawrence. The effort is the result of a partnership between the Community Health Center and Opportunity Knocks, a local consortium of educators, health care providers and child care agencies.

Launched last spring, the clinic, dubbed Miles of Smiles, has visited 15 schools and eight community agencies in Middletown and Clinton. Officials hope to expand next year, reaching as many of the roughly 6,500 children in Middlesex County who participate in the state-subsidized HUSKY insurance program. The clinic is free for patients enrolled in HUSKY; uninsured patients are charged a nominal fee.

"We hope to roll out in other needy communities where the HUSKY and uninsured populations are abundant," said program manager Melanie Wilde.

About 60 percent of the children have never visited a dentist before, Wilde estimated. "The rates of [tooth] decay are so high," she said.

Education is a big part of each visit. Once Waitowitz has them in the chair, she tells her young patients about the importance of brushing.

The outreach includes parents as well. Wilde spends a great deal of time talking to parents about good dental care.

"They know their child needs vaccinations to attend school so they keep up their well-child visits, but they don't always think of the importance of dental care," Wilde said. "They think, 'It's just baby teeth; it doesn't matter.'"

Bringing dental care into the schools makes sense, said Jessica Jimenez, the program's dental care coordinator. It takes away some of the anxiety a visit to the dentist's office might typically engender. "This is an environment they're familiar with," Jimenez said. Plus, she added, there's less of a chance of a missed appointment.

After about 15 minutes, Waitowitz put down her tools and Jamie hopped out of the chair his new sealant in place. He flashed a dazzling smile and walked back to his class.