

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**Protecting children's teeth: Oral health education partnership launches**

A new oral health education programme is focused on improving the oral health of children in three Nelson/Tasman kindergartens.



Launched by Nelson Marlborough Health and the Nelson Tasman Kindergarten Association, with the support of Soroptimist International (Nelson), the programme will run for the next two years at Victory, Nelson South and Laura Ingram kindergartens.

Esme Palliser, Oral Health Educator with Nelson Marlborough Health's Community Oral Health Service, says the programme is based on a successful two-year pilot project which ran in all of the kindergartens in Marlborough.

"The goal is to teach children how to care for their teeth and prevent decay, and also encourage greater awareness and involvement by families," Esme says.

"We want every child in our region to be enrolled in the free community oral health service – kindergartens have a huge role to play in this and these three kindergartens will work with parents to ensure no children fall through the cracks."

In preparation for the programme, Nelson Marlborough Health staff has taught kindergarten teachers how to recognise the early signs of decay so that children can then be referred to clinics.

"Teachers are hugely influential – if anyone can make tooth-brushing a fun, regular part of a child's day, they can, as well as encourage healthy habits among the families that they see," Esme says.

Esme says that by the age of five, 42 per cent of children in the Nelson Marlborough region have some decay.

"Tooth decay, which is preventable, is one of the most common diseases in young children in our region and is the number one reason to undergo general anaesthetic for extractions before they are seven years old.

"People might not be aware just how devastating this can be for children. Baby teeth are very important.

"Without healthy baby teeth, young children are at risk of not being able to eat properly, speak properly and their self-esteem and socialisation can really suffer."

Esme says that healthy baby teeth are also essential for the development of adult teeth – they pave the way.

Nelson Tasman Kindergarten Association Chief Executive Trish Casey says that Victory, Nelson South and Laura Ingram kindergartens were chosen because they have the highest roll numbers of all 19 kindergartens in the region.

"Nelson Tasman Kindergartens is delighted that the expertise of Nelson Marlborough Health and the passion of Soroptimists has been harnessed to bring this programme to our kindergartens. We strive to have positive effects on children's health and this is another great example of this in action," Trish says.

Soroptimist International of Nelson has funded a two-year supply of toothbrushes and toothpaste for each kindergarten.

Nelson Marlborough Health's Community Oral Health Service also provides toothpaste, toothbrushes and oral health education resources for the parent volunteers who run 'breakfast clubs' at four Nelson and Tasman schools.

Photo caption: Children at Nelson South Kindergarten practice their tooth-brushing techniques

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