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Dentists check in on kids' healthy smiles

Free care offered for Give Kids a Smile Day



Erik Chalhoub/Register-Pajaronian Pediatric dentist Josh Taff examines Angelica Zacarias-Martinez's teeth Saturday at Dientes.

By ERIK CHALHOUB OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Dientes Community Dental Care in Santa Cruz participated in the 10th annual national "Give Kids a Smile Day Saturday by providing free dental care for children from low-income families .

"The need for dental care in our community is really tremendous , " said Laura Marcus, executive director of Dientes.

Dientes, currently in its 20th year, has participated in the event every year. Marcus said Dientes expected 80 children and their families to show up on Saturday.

"It's really been a successful program," she said.

On Saturday, Dientes and volunteers from the Monterey Bay Dental Hygiene Society provided free exams and cleanings for children. Marcus said Driscoll's Berries donated \$6,000 to support follow-up treatments.

"That way, if we find something wrong today, the parents won't have to pay later," she said.

Dientes, which opened in 1992 and moved into its current location on 1830 Commercial Way in 2003, primarily serves low-income patients, with about 20,000 visits per year, Marcus said. According to a press release from Dientes, there are an estimated 17,800 uninsured children in Santa Cruz County. This is due to their parents being unemployed, not being U.S. citizens or not qualifying for dental insurance due to their low-income status, Marcus said. Besides emergency treatments , Marcus said Dientes is booked for the next three months. Expansion plans are currently in the works. Dientes is planning on adding a children's wing; according to Marcus, the project is estimated to cost \$2 million. Marcus said she hopes the clinic can secure funding from the state in August .

Parents' lack of understanding and resources has contributed to tooth decay problems in 50 percent of children in California, Marcus said, recommending that all children see a dentist by the age of 2. The event on Saturday was the first step toward reversing the problem, she said.