



# NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
July 7, 2009

Contact: Amanda Keating  
(202) 834-3179  
[Amanda.keating@rubinmeyer.com](mailto:Amanda.keating@rubinmeyer.com)

## **Survey: Recession Forcing Low-Income Families to Sacrifice Kids' Dental Care**

*Poll shows nearly half of all low-income parents forced to choose food, transportation and housing at expense of regular check-ups for kids*

*Nashville, Tenn.* – A recent survey of low-income parents has found that financial stress caused by the economic recession is forcing many families to choose between basic necessities such as food, transportation and housing, and routine dental care for their children – exacerbating an epidemic of poor dental health among children from underserved communities.

“There is an overwhelming need for dental care for economically-disadvantaged children across the country,” said Dr. Steven Adair, a faculty member of the Medical College of Georgia and Chief Dental Officer of FORBA, the nation’s largest dental practice management company focused on care for low-income kids. Adair oversees clinical and quality initiatives at FORBA’s nationwide associated network of Small Smiles dental centers.

“The surgeon general has called tooth decay among low-income children a silent epidemic,” he said. “The financial hardship brought about by the recession is putting more children at risk for tooth decay and more serious, even life-threatening, health problems.”

“The results of this survey indicate an ongoing need for dental education in our communities, and a continued commitment of resources that help ensure the lifelong oral health of children in need,” said Burt Edelstein, Chair and founder of the Washington, D.C.-based Children’s Dental Health Project, which advocates for policies that improve children’s access to oral health services.

“Current health care reform efforts in Congress offer a number of opportunities to improve children’s oral health. Information from the survey can help inform current congressional efforts on reform that stress education and prevention as well as treatment. When parents are forced to sacrifice their children’s health to make ends meet, there are consequences that can have a lasting impact on a child’s overall health, speech, nutrition and development,” said Edelstein. “The financial pressure felt by many of these families is putting children’s health at risk.”

The national online poll, conducted May 29-30, surveyed 210 parents of young children in households with annual incomes of \$35,000 or less. The survey found that among respondents:

- Nearly half (44 percent) said they have experienced financial difficulties related to the current economic recession, and have been forced to choose between dental care for their children and other necessities such as food, transportation and housing.
- One in five (20 percent) take their child to the dentist less than once per year, far below the American Dental Association’s recommendation of two annual check-ups.

-- MORE --

# NEWS

-- Page 2 --

- Approximately 16 percent indicated that their child is uninsured, and more than 40 percent said their family receives government health assistance from such programs as Medicaid and CHIP.
- Approximately 18 percent said they have trouble locating a dentist who will treat their child, a finding that reflects a national problem: in some states, fewer than 1 in 4 dentists will treat children from low-income families that receive Medicaid.

Among the respondents who indicated that the recession had forced tough financial choices between dental care and other necessities, the results indicate even greater challenges to children's dental health. The survey found that of those who indicated financial stress:

- Almost three out of four (74 percent) said their child visits a dentist less than once each year.
- A large majority (86 percent) said they have trouble finding a dentist to treat their children.
- Three out of four (75 percent) said their children are uninsured.

"About 80 percent of the tooth decay found in American children is found in only 20 percent of children, and most of those kids come from low-income families," said Adair. "Care for these children must remain a priority both for parents and communities."

"At a time when many families have been affected by a loss of income and other hardships, we are going to continue to engage communities with vital care and education initiatives," said FORBA Chairman and CEO Michael G. Lindley, whose Small Smiles network of associated dental clinics has provided free screenings for nearly 10,000 children this year. "We will continue to work to ensure that children in need get the healthy smiles they deserve."

Survey details and tips for safeguarding children's dental health may be found by visiting: [www.smallsmilesusa.com](http://www.smallsmilesusa.com).

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## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

Please contact *Amanda Keating* at (202) 898-0995 or [Amanda.keating@rubinmeyer.com](mailto:Amanda.keating@rubinmeyer.com) to reach the following experts, who are available for interviews and comment:

- **Dr. Steven Adair, DDS, MS**, Chief Dental Officer of FORBA and faculty member of the Medical College of Georgia. Certified by the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry and a fellow of the American College of Dentists, Adair is also the former editor-in-chief of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and has served as a member of the AAPD Board of Trustees. He has advised the Commission on Dental Accreditation, the Joint Commission of National Dental Examiners, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration Dental Products Panel, and the U.S. Air Force.
- **Dr. Burton L. Edelstein, DDS, MPH**, Chair and Founding Director of the Children's Dental Health Project. Burt Edelstein is a board certified pediatric dentist and professor of dentistry and public health at Columbia University, where he is Chairman of the Section on Social and Behavioral Sciences. Burt practiced pediatric dentistry in Connecticut and taught pediatric dentistry and oral health policy at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine for 21 years before committing to full-time health policy practice. He served as a 1996-7 Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Fellow in the office of U.S. Senate minority leader Tom Daschle with primary responsibilities for CHIP. He also worked with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on its oral health initiatives from 1998 to 2001, chaired the U.S. Surgeon General's Workshop on Children and Oral Health, and authored the child section of the U.S. Surgeon General's Report Oral Health in America. With support from the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, American Academy of Pediatrics, and American Dental Education Association, Dr. Edelstein founded the Children's Dental Health Project in 1997.