

This Valentine's Day, Teach Your Children to LOVE Their Smiles

By Randi S. Tillman, DMD, MBA

Chief Dental Officer, The Guardian Life Insurance Company of America

Most parents I speak to understand that dental care is a critical part of their child's overall health and well-being. As a dentist with over 30 years of experience though, many people would be surprised at how often I learn of children missing days of school, experiencing pain, and facing health issues later in life because of poor oral hygiene.

It is so important to teach children positive oral health habits at an early age and parents, even more so than dentists, are primarily responsible for helping children form positive oral health habits at an early age. With so many holidays and occasions that center around sweets, kids need help from adults to keep their smiles healthy.

Valentine's Day, like Halloween, birthdays, and holidays, is yet another occasion when kids exchange sugary hard candies, sticky sweets, and chocolatey, nutty, caramel-y morsels of all sizes and shapes. And while sharing and eating candy is fun, these sugary foods can cause harmful and lasting repercussions for your little one's teeth. Parents and caregivers can safeguard their kid's teeth from all this sugar with a few helpful tricks:

1. Save Candy for Meal Times

Try to save your kiddos' Valentine's treats for meal times. Our mouths produce extra saliva while eating other foods which can help rinse away harmful food particles.

2. Be Mine, Chocolate

Sticky, hard, and gummy candies are delicious but are hard to remove from the tooth's surface which can allow the bacteria to create acid in the mouth. Acid can lead to tooth decay. Hard candies can chip teeth, which is worrisome especially with permanent teeth. Instead, opt to hand-out chocolate. Chocolate is a better alternative because its sugar does not stick as much.

3. Yum, Gum

Research has shown that sugar-free gum containing [Xylitol](#) may decrease the risk of caries. There are other benefits from offering your little Valentine a piece of sugar-free gum instead of a hard candy or gummy -- gum will distract from a sweet tooth and increase saliva to wash the mouth.

4. More Water Equals More Love for Your Teeth

Substitute water for soda or juice. A glass of water will help rinse their mouth, along with the sugar from candy. Other drinks like soda and juice have added sugars so water is the best option.

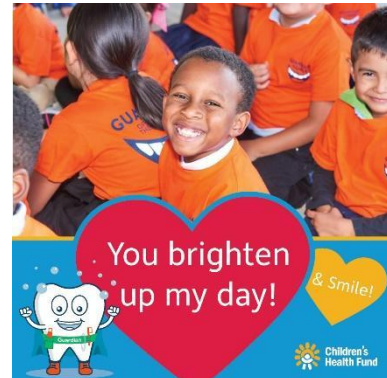
5. Brush-and-Floss Boss

Set a good example and be part of your child's oral health routine. According to the ADA, parents should brush kids' teeth until they are 7-8 years old and should supervise until about age 10. Parents should also help their child floss once per day, preferably in the evening.

By taking preventive measures in dental care, parents can help their kids show their teeth some love!

Guardian and Children's Health Fund created a fun, educational, and parent-inclusive program called *Guardians of the Smile* that teaches children how to take care of their teeth. As part of the program, our friend, the Tooth Guardian, is traveling across the country to teach kids how they can keep their smiles clean and healthy all year long.

For more information about this program, visit <https://www.childrenshealthfund.org/guardiansofthesmile/>.





About Randi S. Tillman, DMD, MBA

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Dr. Tillman is a seasoned healthcare professional with more than 30 years of experience in dental insurance, managed care, and health economics. In 2017, she joined Guardian as Chief Dental Officer, where she is responsible for clinical policy, claims adjudication, oral health and wellness initiatives and clinical professional training. Dr. Tillman earned her dental degree from the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine and an MBA from Columbia University. She began her business career as the director of dental products and policy at Empire Blue Cross and Blue Shield in New York. She subsequently assumed dental leadership positions at Prudential, Cigna, and Oxford Health Plans.

In an unusual career trajectory, Dr. Tillman spent ten years within the biotech and medical device industries, where she leveraged her knowledge of health care and reimbursement to pursue her interests in health economics and outcomes research.

In recent years, Dr. Tillman has turned her attention to the economics of oral health care delivery and issues related to reimbursement, utilization management and the detection of fraud, waste, and abuse. She has been a champion for initiatives related to oral health and wellness throughout her career.

About *Guardians of the Smile*

Guardian, one of the nation's largest dental insurance providers, and Children's Health Fund are on a mission to ensure children do not fall behind in school and limit their potential because of poor dental health. Thanks to efforts from our employee volunteers and partners, the *Guardians of the Smile* program has supported more than 11,000 dental encounters, generated awareness and excitement for oral health by bringing the program directly to schools in communities across the country, donated more than \$20,000 to event site partners that will provide healthy food, education, and resources to the community, and provided hundreds of dental care kits to children, each with floss, toothpaste, and a toothbrush. Follow the Tooth Guardian's journey [here!](#)