

# Towards a Cavity-Free Future for Infants and Children in Canada—Policy Lab Outcomes

## 1. The Challenge: Untreated tooth decay afflicts up to 90% of children in some Canadian communities.

- Dental caries (or tooth decay) in children younger than six is termed ‘Early Childhood Caries’ (ECC). Dental caries in children can result in cavities, abscesses and pain, as well as lead to other complications.
- There is a lack of national data on overall prevalence of ECC, but it is known to be a severe problem amongst First Nations, Inuit and Metis Children. Up to 90% of children in some northern and remote indigenous communities are affected.
- Children in urban areas in households with a lower socioeconomic status are particularly affected in large numbers.
- Across Canada, 1.2% of children end up with dental surgery under general anesthesia. Children in rural areas are three times more likely to need dental surgery than children from urban areas.

## 2. The Opportunity: This is a ‘moment in time’ to maximize caries prevention and care for children in Canada.

- 2.1. **Global Developments:** The WHO has agreed a Resolution on Oral Health and consulted on an Oral Health Strategy, resulting in a Draft Global Oral Health Action Plan with the overarching goals of a 10% relative reduction in oral diseases and conditions as well as ensuring 80% of the global population will be covered by essential oral health care services. The FDI has emphasized the centrality of oral health to overall health in its Vision 2030.
- 2.2. **Developments in Canada:** The Federal government has committed \$5.3 billion to provide dental care for the uninsured. Now referred to as the ‘Canada Dental Benefit’, the program currently will target children under 12 years of age from families with an annual income of less than \$90,000.

## 3. The Policy Lab: How to maximize caries prevention and care amongst infants and children.

- A policy lab is a collaborative workshop that brings together diverse stakeholders to discuss and make a breakthrough on a particular problem. This policy lab focused on what else was needed in terms of investments or other conditions to maximize prevention and care amongst infants and children.

## 4. The Ambition for 2030 developed at this lab is for: Enhanced prevention, wider access, improved outcomes and sustainable funding.

- Six Ambitions for 2030:
  - Equal access to prevention and care tailored to communities
  - 90% of children to be covered by insurance with access to primary and preventive care
  - ECC reduction on average by 10%
  - An integrated healthcare team that is part of the healthcare system
  - A data system with the information on caries prevention and care
  - Permanent foundation for infant and children oral health prevention and care.
- Four guiding principles:
  - Understanding different population needs
  - Learn from existing good practice in Canada and internationally
  - Tailored approaches that balance Federal, Province/Territory and local municipalities
  - Engage different stakeholders in planning and ‘first step’ actions.

## 5. The proposed actions: Creating momentum towards the 2030 Ambition

- 5.1. **Strategic enablers:**
- Sustainable funding would allow very effective interventions to be supported, while finding a more joined-up approach to planning and delivery of oral health would allow a redesigning of dental payment systems and remuneration policies.
  - There is a pressing need to improve the quality of available data. This requires a set of minimum outcome measures Canada-wide. Data definitions should then be standardized across the dental coding system.
- 5.2. **Upstream prevention:**
- Focus policy attention on the fact that oral health is heavily influenced by the wider determinants of health and especially sugar consumption.
  - Locally appropriate fluoride strategies will provide benefits as part of an overall strategy to improve oral health.
- 5.3. **Oral health workforce:**
- Shift perceptions and practice amongst the dentistry profession from treatment to prevention and care.
  - All aspects of early childhood oral health should be fully integrated into the primary care and wider health systems. This would allow for an expansion of the wider oral health team to encompass as many professions and other caregivers as possible.
- 5.4. **Community empowerment:**
- Services must be co-designed with patients and communities so that they are culturally and community appropriate.
  - Developing practical tools and apps will help empower parents and families to take part in the prevention of ECC.

## 6. Next Steps

- Work with the full range of stakeholders in order to achieve a Cavity-Free Future.
- Run listening exercises where each group is invited to share their perspectives and consider the Policy Lab proposals.
- A range of ways to take these steps forward have been proposed in the full document.

Based on the advice and policy recommendations from the Oral Health Policy Lab in Ottawa.

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