

Study: Dental insurance is key to children's health

By Lisa Fernandez

Mercury News

Article Launched: 09/11/2008 03:40:43 PM PDT

More than 60 percent of low-income Santa Clara County children who received dental insurance from an innovative health program actually went to see a dentist, according to a study released Thursday.

And 44 percent of them had a cavity filled or another problem fixed.

By comparison, only 22 percent of low-income children without insurance went to see a dentist and only 16 percent received treatment, the study found.

Chris Trenholm, associate director of research at Mathematica Policy Research in Washington, D.C., one of the study's co-authors, said the findings are more dramatic than even advocates of the Healthy Kids had expected.

Trenholm stressed the "broader picture" of giving health insurance access to the masses. Children who have health care actually use it, he said, which prevents larger and more expensive problems down the road.

He echoed the report: "Dental coverage is a powerful tool for relieving immediate suffering and improving children's health and well being."

About 10,000 low-income children in Santa Clara County participate in Healthy Kids, a county-based insurance program serving about 85,000 children in 30 of California's 58 counties, which began in Santa Clara County in 2001.

Children who are eligible for Healthy Kids are typically undocumented immigrants or those whose parents earn slightly more than the maximum allowed to qualify for state or federal health insurance programs.

The study released Thursday was conducted by Mathematica, the University of California-San Francisco, the Urban Institute and Johns Hopkins University.

Contact Lisa Fernandez at lfernandez@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5002.