

TEACHERS ARE BUYING PUPILS TOOTHBRUSHES AND TOOTHPASTE IN COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS



The cost-of-living crisis is impacting on the oral health of children in classrooms across Britain, with most teachers now stepping in to provide pupils with the basics, according to new research.*

A survey of secondary teachers by grassroots hygiene poverty charity Beauty Banks in partnership with the British Dental Association (BDA) revealed:

- Four in five (83%) say they or their school have given students toothbrushes and toothpaste. Eighty-one percent said there are children in their school who don't have regular access to toothpaste
- Forty percent said this leads to students being socially excluded by their peers because of oral hygiene issues. Half report children isolating themselves. One third have witnessed bullying directly
- Twenty-five percent say children miss school because of poor oral hygiene. Three quarters (74%) said children who don't have regular access to oral health products have discoloured teeth. Half said children had noticeable tooth decay. Thirty percent noted children in dental pain or suffering from halitosis
- Nearly a third (31%) of teachers who witness poverty in the classroom report said it affected their mental health. One in four are kept awake at night worrying about their students' wellbeing.

‘Toothbrushes are becoming a “luxury item” for some families, and the state of children’s dental health is a “national disgrace”.’

News follows warnings made early in the New Year from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, that toothbrushes are becoming a ‘luxury item’ for some families, and that the state of children’s dental health is a ‘national disgrace’.

Beauty Banks, established in January 2018, supports individuals and families in the UK who can’t afford to stay clean.

Jo Jones, co-founder of Beauty Banks, said: ‘We work with charities including food banks, family centres, domestic abuse centres, homeless shelters and universally – across the board – toothpaste is now our most requested item. Before the cost-of-living-crisis, it wasn’t even in the top three.

‘So we initiated this research with the British Dental Association to fully understand the immediate and long-term impact of a lack of access to fundamental but vital oral hygiene essentials.’

Tooth decay remains the most common reason for hospital admissions among young children. According to the BDA, tooth decay in children has reached epidemic levels, with any recent gains set to be undone by ongoing access problems and disruption to public health programmes.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: ‘Our youngest patients face a perfect storm, with millions unable to access care, or even the basics to maintain good oral health. This shocking survey underlines that deep health inequalities are set to widen.

‘Yet while our children face an epidemic of decay, the government seems asleep at the wheel.’

The latest NHS dental statistics indicate that just 44.8% of children attended a dentist appointment in the last year, down from 58.7% in 2019/20, a net result of pandemic disruption.

Unsurprisingly, this oral hygiene crisis creates a more challenging working environment for teachers.

Beauty Banks co-founder Sali Hughes said: ‘Our teaching workforce spends a significant amount of time dealing with the impact of poverty on pupils, that they want to spend on educating their classes.

‘Hygiene poverty causes not only social exclusion in children but educational exclusion, too.’

While NHS dentistry is free for children and some adults, often based on their benefit status, many on modest incomes have to pay. Dental charges were first introduced to discourage attendance, and nearly one in five adult patients have delayed treatment for cost reasons, according to the last Adult Dental Health Survey. The BDA is now deeply concerned that current economic conditions and access problems will inevitably see more patients deferring treatment.

‘TOOTH HURTS: SMILES SHAPED BY POVERTY. Polling by Mortar Research of 260 UK state secondary school teachers, fieldwork October 2022.