

Dental neglect may indicate child neglect and abuse

A new policy urging dentists to check for tell-tale signs of neglect when treating children with severe oral disease has been published.

Dr Peter Sidebotham from the University of Warwick has co-authored the policy document on dental neglect in children for the British Society of Paediatric Dentistry.

Dental neglect is defined as the persistent failure to meet a child's basic oral health needs. Oral disease can have a significant impact on the health of a child. Consequences can include severe pain, loss of sleep and even reductions in body weight and growth.

Dental neglect can be indicative of a wider welfare picture of child neglect and abuse and the policy states that dentists should refer cases to child protection services if they have concerns.

Evidence: abused children have higher levels of untreated dental disease

The document, thought to be the first of its kind in Europe, is the result of collaboration between the University of Warwick, University of Sheffield and Leeds Dental Institute.

Dr Sidebotham said: "There is evidence which indicates that abused children have higher levels of untreated dental disease than their non-abused peers. Many dentists have taken part in child protection training, but still find it difficult to put into practice what they have learned when they suspect abuse."

The policy details the numerous factors that need to be taken into account when assessing a child with suspected dental neglect and given guidance on how the dental team should respond.

Dr Sidebotham added: "I am impressed by how much dentists already do to educate and support parents. But when concerned that a child is suffering, perhaps as a result of missed appointments, I would always encourage them to seek advice from other health professionals experience in child protection and , if necessary, to make a child protection referral."

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