

## Dental Hygienists

# Home & Away



## Don't Forget To Brush Your Teeth!

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According to the Ontario Dental Association, tooth decay is the second most common reason why children miss school in Ontario. During my 9 years as a registered dental hygienist, I have witnessed the degree and severity of dental caries in children of all ages. To see a child suffering, especially from something that is preventable, is hard to accept.

Soon after I joined Dr. Schneider's dental team in Ridgeway, Ontario, Dr.

Schneider's wife, Laura, approached me about going to a local daycare to present a unique dental education program that she created called, "Don't Forget to Brush Your Teeth." At that time, we only had some cute puppets, a few props, and a short script, but a lot of determination to make a difference in our community.

It didn't take long for me to realize that Laura is full of creative talent, and I quickly saw the program grow with the addition of more props for each season, costumes, music, sound effects, and a longer script. In addition to making presentations at local daycares, we started going



▲ From left to right: Melissa Holmes, Laura Schneider, Dr. Schneider

to elementary schools to present to the primary grades in the school gymnasiums. Not long after the start of "Don't Forget to Brush Your Teeth," Dr. Schneider bought microphones and speakers to help us ease the strain on our voices. Next was an enclosed trailer to transport all of the program supplies, props, and sound equipment since a car was no longer large enough to hold everything.

With the help of a "villain" (usually played by the school's principal), our live performances

use a combination of fun, entertainment, humour, and education to promote good dental habits and healthy food choices. The lessons are layered so the knowledge builds a solid foundation and gives the children positive dental memories. They learn about gloves, masks, and the dental chair so they know what to expect at a dental appointment. Since everyone learns differently, we try to reach each child through different interactive components such as a game show, songs, and dressing up in tooth costumes. Afterwards, Dr. Schneider, Laura, and I answer the children's dental questions.



▲ I assemble all of the take-home kits from my living room



▲ Children's art that was on display for us at Mary Ward Catholic Elementary School



◀ The brushing station

Teachers, school staff, and parents are also part of our audiences, and we have received a lot of positive feedback from them. The adults are even learning a lot, and I frequently hear them say, "I wish we had this when I was in school." Teachers and parents have noticed that the children are using what they have learned and are even teaching the rest of their family about taking care of their teeth.

"Don't Forget to Brush Your Teeth" presentations run each Friday during the school year and are completely free. We are currently working with schools in the District School Board of Niagara and the Niagara Catholic District School Board. It has been a huge commitment, since we arrive at the schools at around 6:30 am, spend over 2.5 hours setting up, devote 2 hours for the live show and then an additional 2 hours to pack up and load everything into the trailer. Last spring alone, we went to 8 schools and taught over 1200 students. We were fully booked until the end of 2013.

Since we want the children to practise what they have learned, they each receive a take-home kit containing flossers, a 2-minute sand timer for brushing from The Niagara Peninsula Dental Association (NPDA), and a toothbrush and toothpaste donated by Colgate. Folded in each kit is also information for parents about the importance of primary teeth, tooth safety, and government-sponsored dental programs available in the Niagara Region for qualifying children. In my spare time, I take on the task of assembling all of the take-home kits from my home.

Even though we are exhausted by the end of each show, the program represents why I went into the dental profession. I'm honoured to be able to give back to my community and make a difference through education and prevention. Each year it just gets bigger and better, and we are very proud to reach out to the children of Niagara.