Absences from School for Dental Appointments

Issue Summary

Introduction:
Dentists in general, and orthodontists in particular, occasionally encounter situations in which parents are reluctant to schedule dental appointments for their children during school hours due primarily to concern about school policies that strongly discourage or even attempt to prohibit such absences. Uncertainty and/or misinformation over when a child is "excused" from school and whether a school will lose money for the child's absence contribute to this situation.

Background and Discussion:
For many years, schools received funding based on the number of children enrolled in the school. Children were "excused" from school for a variety of reasons that were considered valid; if they were ill or had an appointment with a healthcare provider, for example, and these absences did not negatively impact school funding. Then, in the late 1990's, the manner in which schools were funded was altered, funding schools based on actual daily student attendance (ADA, or Average Daily Attendance). This change in funding placed the focus on each student's attendance and created great incentive for schools to ensure the highest daily attendance possible.

The California Education Code, section 46010.3, defines student attendance as follows: Notwithstanding subdivision (a) of Section 46010 or any other provision of law, for purposes of calculating days of attendance in order to compute any apportionment of state funding under this code, a pupil enrolled in a regular day class, including opportunity classes and classes conducted in county community schools, for the minimum day that is applicable to that pupil is deemed to be present for the entire school day, unless he or she is absent for the entire school day.

Practically, this means that if a child is present for at least half the school day, he/she is considered "present" and the school is reimbursed for that child's attendance. However, some of the continuing conflict with schools and parents on this issue results because, in primary school, attendance is taken once/day, at the beginning of school. If a child is absent for that attendance record, the school may not have a system for capturing the child's attendance once they return to school, and may lose funding for that day.

It is important to note that despite the change in school funding policies, California Education Code §48205(a)(3) provides that a pupil shall be excused from school when the absence is for the purpose of having medical, dental, optometrical, or chiropractic services rendered.

Dentists who treat children should be aware of these regulations and the possible areas of confusion, so if faced with a parent who claims the child will be penalized for missing school, or the school does not allow children to leave for dental appointments, he/she will be able to respond appropriately. To assist dentists, in January 2009, the California

Dental Association and the California Society of Pediatric Dentistry collaborated on a letter that dentists can provide to parents or school administrators questioning school absences for dental care. The letter is available to download on the CDA and CSPD Web sites.

Conclusion:

It is important that children receive the care dentists provide and it is not feasible to provide all of that care during non-school hours. Whenever possible, parents are likely to schedule their child's dental appointment so that it does not conflict with school, especially the first half of the school day when daily attendance is recorded   However, when absence from school is necessary and a parent seems particularly worried that the appointment is not "excused" by the school, dentists who understand the implications of the child's absence from a school policy perspective may be helpful in reassuring parents that their child's attendance for a minimum of half the school day will not negatively impact school funding and that receiving dental care is a valid reason for school absence.

RESOURCE:
California Education Code, accessed at:
http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=edc&group=46001-47000&file=46010-46014