Tooth decay is a common chronic illness among children in the United States, despite being almost entirely preventable. Painful tooth decay and oral diseases, if untreated, could be a root to more health and emotional problems.

Nan Peterson, Director of Child Health Advocacy at American Family Children’s Hospital at UW Hospital and Clinics, says, “Good oral health is essential to overall health and well-being of our children. Untreated tooth decay affects a child's ability to learn in the classroom, their ability to eat comfortably, to speak, and their self-esteem and social relationship.”

This past year, American Family Children’s Hospital partnered with Access Community Health Centers, Madison Metropolitan School District, some county school districts and Public Health of Madison of Madison and Dane County to launch the “Celebrate Smiles” initiative with the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile Program. This school-based program provides preventive and restorative oral health care to the children who reside within Dane County.

Children from lower income households are more vulnerable to oral disease because they are less likely to make visits to dentists than higher-income families. “The target population for the Celebrate Smiles project is schools with the highest free/reduced lunch program statistics,” Peterson explains.

Jeff Poltawsky, Vice President for American Family Children’s Hospital, says, “This collaborative model with many community partners works to lessen the disparities and improve access to preventive services for children in our community, using a best practice, school-based, model of care.”

“We are seeing many more children with the school-based, prevention model,” says Peterson. “All children are screened at a school. Children who need prevention services (sealants, fluoride varnish) or restorative services can receive proper care.”

Children may also receive more comprehensive care and treatment. Peterson explains, “If the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile moves on to the next school before services are done, children can obtain the rest of their treatment at Access Community Health Centers.”

This past school year, the Celebrate Smiles initiative screened 3,541 students at nine schools and provided preventive or restorative care to 3,999 teeth within the mouths of
996 elementary school-age children. This charity care program enables children without insurance to receive treatment at no cost. Peterson says, “American Family Children’s Hospital is grateful to the Ronald McDonald House Charities for its ongoing support of this program.”

For the 2011-2012 school year, Celebrate Smiles expects to increase its reach of elementary schools within Dane County by 50 percent, providing more children with the skills for improved oral health, breaking the cycle of decay, and lessening the burden of oral health for young children.