



Making Missouri Better, One Smile at a Time

By April Klutenkamper, Marketing Director
Youth In Need, St. Charles, MO

Dr. Kristiane Naegler is making Missouri communities better, one smile at a time.

Owner of Missouri-based Accent Dental, with locations in St. Louis, Wentzville and Columbia, Dr. Naegler and her staff are working to ensure that children in Youth In Need's Head Start and Early Head Start program have a positive first-time dental experience—and it can even be fun!

With access to quality care a high priority for families, Dr. Naegler and her team currently provide exams at two of Youth In Need's centers, one in St. Louis and one in Warrenton, with plans to expand to all of Youth In Need's Head Start locations in the future. To date, she's seen 51 children at both locations. Parents don't need to be present, which allows her to do exams while the kiddos are already in care at the centers. Home-based families also are invited to attend on exam days.

"Dr. Naegler has been able to educate families about the importance of starting dental care early," said Carrie Williams, Youth In Need's Health Manager.

Williams explained that families can face many barriers when it comes to accessing dental care. "But it's that whole education piece that's important: Dental health is just one part of a child's overall health. Poor dental health can impact other body systems that lead to other health concerns."

Dr. Naegler stresses that parents play a key role in a child's dental health. "Sometimes it's the parents' fear of the dentist that has kept children away," Dr.

Naegler said. "We can help alleviate that fear. We also provide parents with simple instructions on how to brush teeth. And we teach them that it's okay to brush their child's teeth for them until they develop the motor skills to do it on their own."

For young children, especially those who haven't received previous dental care, visiting a dentist for the first time can be full of fear and uncertainty. And a bad dental experience can set the tone for a child's relationship with dental care moving forward.

All of Dr. Naegler's exams are non-invasive and use no "poking instruments," she said. "We just look in the mouth and feel around."



Dr. Kristiane Naegler

The rest of the exam is about asking questions, which is especially important in infant exams. "Since the babies obviously don't have teeth yet, we ask if they are bottle-feeding or nursing okay," Dr. Naegler said. That helps identify if any of the babies are tongue-tied or lip-tied. "We identify any issues and then refer the child back to their pediatrician or lactation consultant to address them."

For older children, Dr. Naegler tries to make exams fun. "If they are excited, we want to take advantage of that and encourage them to hop up in the chair," she said. "We even might invite a friend to put on a mask and gloves and look in their mouth. It's all so they can get used to the experience."

Ultimately, Dr. Naegler's exams are not intended to replace a child's routine dental

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~ Dr. Naegler

exam, but to provide education, give children a taste of what to expect at the dentist and identify any potential concerns so families can follow up with their primary dentist. If a child doesn't have a dental home and there's an emergency, Dr. Naegler will donate those services as well.

In order to provide a limited oral exam, Dr. Naegler donates all of the equipment she needs for a mobile visit. “We bring everything in to do the exams,” she said. “We donate all of the supplies: gloves, wipes, instruments and fluoride, and we pay for the staff time of the staff who come with me.” Each child gets a brand new toothbrush in the color of his or her choice at each visit, too.

Williams said Dr. Naegler has donated more than \$4,000 in services to Youth In Need's programs just in those two visits. And while the program's dental numbers will continue to improve with Dr. Naegler's involvement, Williams is certain the greater impact is in a kiddo's overall health.

“If a kiddo is in care and is having dental issues, they can have a hard time paying attention,” Williams said. “But if their mouth is healthy, their body is healthy, and they can focus on learning.”

For Dr. Naegler, the feeling she gets from giving back far exceeds any financial impact. Early in her career, she participated in a two-year hospital residency program that centered on underserved populations. “It really struck a chord with me, and I gravitated to giving back,” she said. “We're lucky to have a great staff of doctors that gives me time to get out in the community and give back.”

“I like the communications and building relationships between people and being able to make somebody's world a little bit better,” Dr. Naegler said.



Dr. Kristiane Naegler, treating patients.

