

# CareSouth Dental: Creating Smiles for the Children of Lee County

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In 2017, CareSouth Carolina, a community health center in the Pee Dee region, was given an office building by a retiring dentist. Knowing the significant oral health disparities in the county, particularly in children, CareSouth officials wanted the building to remain a dental office.

The building, however, needed many repairs and money was tight. That's when the BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina Foundation stepped in to help. With a grant from the Foundation, CareSouth had enough funding to update the dental equipment and have it ready for its young patients.

Now, the CareSouth Dental Office is the only dental practice serving the needs of children in Bishopville and all of Lee County.

"Without that grant, the children in this community would be going to school with toothaches or missing school," says Dr. Joshua Hubbard, practicing dentist at the facility. "It's definitely helping the kids here."



### *Building relationships is the first step to better oral health*

Hubbard knows all too well the challenges his young patients face.

“Oral health affects their performance in school,” he says.

Another challenge is getting the child to show up for the office visit. Many times, finding transportation to the dental office is a sticking point, or parents may not be able to take time off from work. These factors prevent children from receiving the dental care they need. As the only dentists’ office in Lee County, Hubbard and his staff know how important they are to the community and they make every effort to show it.

“We are for the children of Bishopville. We are their only chance,” he says.

For many of the kids Hubbard treats, sitting in a dentist’s chair is uncharted territory. According to Hubbard, many of his patients have never been to a dentist — some don’t even have their own toothbrush. He says he may use the first visit to build relationships, taking the time to get to know his patients and manage their anxiety.

“We’ll take an office visit and we focus on relationship. No expectations,” he says. “We do what they let us do. We meet them wherever they are.”

Before they leave his office, his patients receive their own toothbrush so they can establish healthy habits at home.

In 2019, CareSouth Dental Office saw approximately 2,000 kids, with nearly 80 percent of them being treated for painful cavities. But the pain isn’t always physical.

“The appearance of their teeth prevents them from smiling, laughing and being able to enjoy themselves,” says Hubbard. “A lot of it starts with self-esteem ... and most of these kids, their self-esteem is really low.”



That's why the first visit is important to Hubbard and his staff. He knows that if he can ease the nervousness, the child can be treated and begin the path to good oral health.

"If they don't have to worry about their teeth hurting, they can concentrate on school," he says. "From a social standpoint and a health standpoint, it just changes the way they feel about themselves."



### *A small investment that'll last a lifetime*

Teaching a child good oral health habits is vital to overall health.

"All the same bacteria that populate the oral cavity also populate the heart and the arteries," says Hubbard. "If you have a big bacterial load in your mouth, it's being transmitted."

For Hubbard, education is key to changing the lives of the people in Lee County. It's about reaching the young so they can start the process.

"The goal is to catch them early when they don't have any teeth problems," he says.

Hubbard says the education doesn't stop with the child, but also extends to parents and other family members.

"I can't tell you how many times I've heard, 'Oh, we just have soft teeth,' when in fact, they have a mouth full of decay and cavities," he says. "So oftentimes I'm educating parents on how important brushing and scheduling regular dentist visits are to the success of their children and to themselves," says Hubbard.

While being the only practicing dental office in Lee County is a great challenge, it's rewarding work for Hubbard and the CareSouth team.

"If you effect change with one person, they go home and they encourage the family. It's not a throwaway service. It really does help people," he says. "If you can make them feel confident early enough in life, then later they go on to be successful. It's a life-changing thing."

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