

Toothprints latest tool in efforts to recover missing children
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Going in for his dental appointment at the offices of Dr. Sharon Mateja didn't scare 6-year-old Wade Beregreen. He wasn't there for a cleaning, wasn't there for an extraction, wasn't even there to floss. Wase went to the dentist for a much more important reason: to possibly help recover him one day should he go missing.

"I wouldn't be scared, even I was three," Wade said mere minutes after the completion of his first-ever Toothprint procedure. Toothprint, a brand new child safety product from the Orange-based company Kerr Manufacturing, offers parents a new level of protection.

The process involves the imprinting of a child's dentition onto an arc-shaped wafer of thermal plastic made pliable by immersion into heated water. After biting into the plastic, the child's bite marks are preserved in the wafer which quickly hardens as it cools back to room temperature. The wafer is then sealed inside a plastic bag, permanently preserving the child's dentition.

Its an important record to have. "Children are so well-protected by preventative dentistry that they often don't have X-rays," said Mateja, whose office is offering the Toothprint procedure free to its patients. "Besides, their X-rays look like the next kid's X-rays."

"I think its excellent," said Alta Loma resident Katherine Bergreen, 39, who accompanied her son Wade to his Toothprint session. "It's one more way to identify children. Dental records are an important step in that process, if he ever was kidnapped."

The Toothprint method offers an ancillary benefit – preservation of salivary DNA useful in the genetic matching process used to identify recovered children. The scent imparted onto the wafer can even be used by search and rescue hounds.

Salivary DNA comes from the mouth's constant shedding of skin cells. Although no specific DNA tests have been done, the saliva collected from a Toothprint wafer left in the mouth during imprinting would contain a significant amount DNA material, enough to make genetic matching possible, according to a Kerr manufacturing press release.

"We get a lot of saliva – calcium, fluride, DNA," said Mateja. "That's exactly what we get here. The film of saliva stays on the surface (of the wafer)." Mateja likened the idea to a "micro ID chip" procedure introduced in the 1980s, in which an information laden chip could be attached to one of the permanent molars. The chip never cought on in popularity due to lack of public interest and awareness of the problem of missing children, Mateja said. "No one wanted it," she said. "Now there's so much publicity about these kind of things."

For Montclair resident Angela Fox, safeguarding the wafer erself offers a level of reassurance over keeping her 6-year-old daughter Darla's information in some form of national database. "There's something that doesn't feel right about having her information on file somewhere," she said. "I don't like that at all."

Fox had other, more sentimental reasons for preferring the procedure. "To me, I'm looking at this as a souvenir of your child," she said. "I'll bronze anything."

The procedure must be first performed after all the primary teeth have come in, repeated after the upper and lower front four teeth and first permanent molars have come in at age 7 or 8 and again at age 12 or 13 after the permanent teeth have come in.

Wade Bergreen has his own ideas on a timetable. "Maybe I'll do it when I'm like 9," he said proudly. "I'll be even braver."