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FUNDING HELPS VULNERABLE KIDS TO SMILE AND THRIVE

A Newcastle charity has expanded its program to help vulnerable school kids get regular dental check-ups and treatment, thanks to \$44,000 in funding from Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation.

There are now 140 Newcastle primary school students, across three schools, enrolled in LIVEfree Project's Smile and Thrive Dental program.

LIVEfree founder and director Chris Jones said the program promotes good oral hygiene and dental care but also provides emotional resilience and mentoring support.

Trained well-being workers take the children to appointments during school hours and afterwards for a mentoring session over lunch or a milkshake. The children receive dental hygiene and education packs, and some families receive regular bags of healthy groceries.

"The kids get essential dental treatment to fix problems that can also be affecting other aspects of their health, their social life, and ability to learn," Ms Jones said.

"Our parents find it difficult to get their children to or to afford dental appointments, so kids miss out on preventative or vital treatment," she said.

"Children don't always want to go to the dentist, but we make it fun and use it as an opportunity to build their self-esteem.

"It is very satisfying when a parent rings me to say that their child is hounding them about when they get to go to the dentist next."

The program partners with No Gap Smiles Adamstown Dental Surgery and New Lambton Dental Family Practice. The charity also works with NSW Dental and the Awabakal Dental Service.

Ms Jones started the program almost four years ago but was only able to run it on a very small scale. She said that as a direct result of funding from Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation, the program will now support three times as many children.

Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation chair Jennifer Leslie met Ms Jones and Merewether Primary School principal, Greg Culhane, at LIVEfree's Adamstown hub to hear about the expanded program's impact since awarding the grant last year.

Ms Leslie said one of the pillars of the Charitable Foundation's funding is helping the vulnerable, marginalised and young people. She said the LIVEfree Project team advocate for families to get access to treatment and follows through until the treatment is done.

"Chris has told me so many stories of the difference the program is making to kids and their families," Ms Leslie said.

"For some kids it is helpful to have a positive relationship with another adult outside of school and home," she said.

“I’ve just been hearing about one little girl’s reward for going through eight big treatments was a trip to the beach on the way back to school – she had never been.”

“LIVEfree Project uses trips to the dentist to reinforce to children that they can start and finish challenging or uncomfortable tasks, seeing things through, which is great for their self-esteem and confidence.

“With statistics showing alarming levels of poor dental health in kids, cost of living pressures and long waits for public dental care, it is vital we help kids and their families learn good lifelong dental health habits,” Ms Leslie said.

[According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare:](#)

- Australian children aged 5–10 have an average of 1.5 decayed, missing and filled deciduous teeth. Kids aged 6–14 have an average of 0.5 decayed, missing and filled permanent teeth.
- 1 in 4 (27 per cent) children aged 5–10 have at least one deciduous tooth with untreated decay. The proportion is lower for children from high-income households (18 per cent) than those from medium-income households (25 per cent) and low-income households (36 per cent).
- Indigenous children (44 per cent) aged 5–10 are more likely to have had at least one deciduous tooth with untreated decay than non-Indigenous children (26 per cent).

LIVEfree Project is a small Adamstown-based charity that provides families who have experienced severe hardship, through family violence, drug abuse or poverty with a range of practical, emotional and wellness support programs. Some Smile and Thrive participants make use of the charity’s school bus service which takes 150 children a week to school. It also provides in-school mentoring at Merewether Public School.

“Being a small charity, and with the wonderful support from our local dental practices, schools and partners, such as Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation and other local businesses, we are able to develop and adapt holistic support services to meet changing community needs, especially in areas of entrenched disadvantage in Newcastle and Hamilton South,” Ms Jones said.

“We are about early intervention and relational care that nurtures, strengthens and connects with community.”

To find out more or to support LIVEfree visit www.livefreeproject.org.au

Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation supports charities and not for profit groups that help overcome disadvantage or create opportunities for marginalised or isolated people. Since 2003, it has provided almost \$25M to more than 520 initiatives. Visit newcastlepermanent.com.au/charitable-foundation.

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