



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health

February 2014
Volume 2, Issue 2

Health Services Newsletter

The importance of helping children and pregnant women establish a dental home.

February is National Children's Dental Health Month, an ideal time to promote the importance of oral health. Developing and maintaining good oral health habits and getting regular oral health care helps children and pregnant women achieve a lifetime of healthy teeth and gums. Helping children and pregnant women enrolled in Head Start establish a dental home is an important service provided by Head Start staff. A dental home offers oral health care delivered in a comprehensive, continuously accessible, coordinated, and family-centered way. A dental home provides oral health services that help children and pregnant women stay healthy by preventing or treating oral diseases.

Children with poor oral health are not healthy and may have many non-oral-health-problems, along with oral health problems. They may not grow and develop as they should because they might have to limit the types of foods they eat. They might have behavior problems or have a hard time concentrating and learning because of tooth pain. They may miss a lot of school. They may develop infections that can lead to other health problems. They might not smile or interact with others because of broken or discolored teeth. They are less likely to do well later in life, compared to children with good oral health.

Children who receive regular oral health care early in life have less oral disease, fewer dental emergencies, and better oral health throughout their lives. Establishing a dental home by age 1 or as early as possible is an important step families can take to keep their child healthy and ready to learn.

Like children, pregnant women also need a dental home. Receiving oral health care during pregnancy is safe and important. Preventing and treating oral disease during pregnancy is effective at maintaining or improving a woman's oral health and is key to her and her infant's overall health and well-being. A pregnant woman who has a dental home is more likely to maintain good oral health during her pregnancy.



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FOR YOUR FAMILY NEWSLETTER

YOU CAN TAILOR THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE TO INCLUDE IN YOUR FAMILY NEWSLETTER:

A dental home for children and pregnant women can be established in a private office, a community clinic, or a health department. In a dental home, the oral health provider and the child's family or the pregnant woman work together to make decisions about care.

Children who receive oral health care early in life are less likely to have tooth decay or dental emergencies. They are also more likely to have a positive attitude about dental visits, which lasts throughout life. Establishing a dental home by age 1 or as early as possible is an important step families can take to keep their child healthy and ready to learn.

Receiving oral health care is safe and important for pregnant women. A woman who has a dental home is more likely to maintain good oral health during her pregnancy. After her baby is born, she is also more likely to practice good oral health habits, which helps keep her and her baby healthy.

WHAT IS A DENTAL HOME?

A dental home is established when a child's family or a pregnant woman and all providers (dentists and other oral health providers as well as non-oral-health providers, as needed) work together to recognize and address all issues that impact the child's or pregnant woman's oral health. A dental home is *not* established when the child or pregnant woman receives only an oral examination without the aspects of the dental home system of care described below:

- Culturally competent and family-focused care that takes into account the strengths and special needs of the child or pregnant woman and their families.
- Comprehensive oral health care, including the prevention and treatment, if needed, of oral diseases (for example, tooth decay and gum disease).
- Comprehensive and continuous assessment of oral diseases and conditions.
- Individualized preventive oral health care plans that are based on each child's or pregnant woman's risk of developing tooth decay, gum disease, or other oral diseases and conditions.
- **Guidance for growth and development issues that may impact a child's oral health** (for example, teething and non-nutritive sucking).
- Plans for addressing dental, head, and facial injuries.
- **Information about present and future care of the child's or pregnant woman's teeth and gums** (for example, educating a pregnant woman about oral health issues related to morning sickness or how to avoid passing tooth-decay-causing bacteria to her infant).
- Dietary counseling.
- Referrals to oral health specialists when care cannot be provided in the dental home and referrals to non-oral-health providers for health care needs identified in the dental home.

Establishing a dental home as early as possible is an important step families can take to keep their child healthy and ready to learn.

PROGRAM POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Your program can do the following to support dental homes for children and pregnant women:

- Establish a policy on how to help families establish a dental home.
- Develop and maintain a list of oral health providers who are willing to provide a dental home for children and pregnant women enrolled in Head Start.
- Create records verifying that each child and pregnant woman has a dental home.
- Create records of each child's and each pregnant woman's oral examination and, if needed, follow-up treatment.
- Create records showing recommended treatment was completed and the family or the pregnant woman followed up on referrals.
- Be aware of the dental services families have access to under your [state Medicaid plan](#). There is high variability among states and health plans; for example, some health plans do not provide dental coverage for pregnant women or for children under age 3.



TIPS FOR WORKING WITH ORAL HEALTH PROVIDERS

Health managers, family service coordinators, and home visitors can take several steps to establish dental homes for children and pregnant woman enrolled in Head Start.

- **Build relationships with oral health providers.** Look for opportunities to talk with oral health providers and visit them in their offices. Share information about Head Start and how the program works to improve the oral health of children and pregnant women. Listen to providers' concerns. Work together to address everyone's concerns (for example, work with families to make sure they keep their child's appointment).
- **Ask oral health providers to adopt a Head Start program.** Oral health providers who adopt a program often become Head Start oral health champions. Many times, these providers develop relationships with Head Start staff and families and become dental home providers for children and pregnant women in Head Start.
- **Collaborate with state-based programs.** Nearly every state health department has an oral health program that helps children and pregnant woman find dental homes. Head Start state collaboration offices, other Head Start programs, and state oral health coalitions may also be of assistance in helping establish dental homes.
- **Invite oral health providers to serve on Head Start health services advisory committees.** Tap into oral health providers' knowledge and experience. Serving as program advisors or committee members improves oral health providers' knowledge and understanding about Head Start.

Engaging Families in Oral Health

Some families and pregnant women may be unaware of the importance of having a dental home. There are a number of strategies Head Start staff can employ to engage families and pregnant women in valuing, finding, and using a dental home. Some of these strategies include:

- **Provide education.** Provide education to families about the effect of oral health on children's overall health and their ability to learn. Share with families that it is difficult for children with a toothache to pay attention in class. Reassure pregnant women that it's safe to receive oral health care any time during their pregnancy.
- **Use motivational interviewing techniques.** Use motivational interviewing techniques to help understand families' and pregnant women's attitudes, beliefs, and practices related to oral health care. Talk with families to identify any misunderstandings about children's oral health. For example, some families wait until their child has a toothache or stains on his or her teeth to schedule the first dental visit. Encourage all families to schedule the first dental visit by age 1, and then schedule dental visits as recommended by the dentist.
- **Build problem-solving and self-management skills.** Use role-playing to help families and pregnant women overcome their fear of going to the dentist or talking to the dentist. Also, coach families to avoid transferring their fears to their child.
- **Offer assistance to navigate the oral health care system.** Help families and pregnant women enroll in Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or other dental insurance programs, if they do not have insurance. Provide information about resources in the community to help them find and establish a dental home.

RESOURCES

Resources Available on ECLKC

[Brush Up on Oral Health](#), October 2013 (Working with Oral Health Providers)

[Brush Up on Oral Health](#), September 2013 (Importance of Regular Dental Visits)

[Brush Up on Oral Health](#), November 2012 (Engaging Parents to Improve Children's Oral Health)

[Dental Hygienists and Head Start: What You Should Know and How You Can Help](#)

[Dentists and Head Start: What You Should Know and How You Can Help](#)

[Medical Providers and Head Start: What You Should Know About Oral Health and How You Can Help](#)

[Oral Health and Learning: When Children's Oral Health Suffers So Does Their Ability to Learn](#)

Other Resources

[The Dental Home: Summary from an MCHB Expert Meeting](#)

[National Children's Dental Health Month](#)

[Oral Health Risk Assessment Timing and Establishment of the Dental Home](#)

[Toward a Comprehensive Health Home: Integrating the Mouth to the Body](#)

*Fostering a culture of health and wellness for
Head Start children, families, and staff.*

NATIONAL CENTER ON HEALTH

Our Goal:

To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

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School readiness begins with health!

