



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health



Brush Up on Oral Health

February 2014

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Did You Know?

- Children begin developing oral health habits early.
- Once a child's oral health habits are set, they are hard to change.
- Oral health impacts many aspects of a child's life, including eating and sleeping habits, learning, self-esteem, and overall health.

Promoting Oral Health in Head Start

Teaching children and parents about oral health throughout the program year is a valuable service that Head Start staff provide. Repeating the same consistent oral health messages helps remind children and their parents about the importance of keeping their mouths healthy and how to do it.



This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* provides strategies that Head Start staff can use to promote good oral health among children enrolled in Head Start and their parents.

Strategies Head Start Staff Can Use to Promote Oral Health

Children learn best when short and simple messages are repeated regularly using various learning methods (for example, see-tell-do). Repeating the same oral health messages in ways that engage and stimulate children's thinking makes them more likely to value and practice good oral health habits. Head Start staff can promote oral health by weaving activities into lesson plans throughout the program year. Here are some examples:

- **Use effective teaching practice to engage children.** Teaching practices that engage children promote thinking and language development. Engaging children in conversation is one practice that's effective in helping children learn new words, think critically, and answer clearly. Some questions that promote conversation include:
 - How do you brush your teeth?
 - Why do we brush our teeth?

- What else can we do to keep our mouth and teeth healthy?
- What happens if we don't brush our teeth?
- Tell me about your last visit to the dentist.

For more information on other teaching practices, see the [15-minute in-service suites](#) at the [National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning](#).

- **Integrate oral health into activities.** In addition to daily toothbrushing, Head Start staff can include oral health in math, science, reading, and art activities. There are many ways to incorporate oral health messages into home visiting, classroom, and socialization activities. Some ideas include:



- Creating a graph focused on a question like "What time of day do you brush your teeth?"
- Having children separate pictures of foods that are good for oral health from pictures of foods that are high in sugar.
- Having children match oral-health-related pictures, like teeth, toothpaste, and a smile to learn words.
- Teaching children how to count and how to recognize colors using toothbrushes.
- Reading books with positive oral health messages to children.
- Having children pretend they are visiting a dental office.
- Singing songs about oral health.

Many curricula for young children are available for free or at low cost (see [Choose and Use: Head Start Oral Health Curricula](#)). These can be used or adapted as enrichment activities. The National Center on Health's [oral health](#) web page also has many resources for use in Head Start programs.

- **Engage parents in promoting oral health at home.** Head Start staff can help parents improve their knowledge and understanding of oral health and develop the skills they need to keep their and their child's mouths healthy. Ideas include:
 - Teaching parents about oral health and their role in promoting their child's oral health. Because young children do not have the hand coordination to brush their teeth well until age 7 to 8, it is important for a parent to brush their teeth or help them with brushing.
 - Having parents demonstrate their toothbrushing skills.
 - Asking parents to take photographs of their child brushing his teeth and helping the child write stories about his experience.
 - Helping parents choose and prepare foods that promote good oral health.
 - Encouraging parents to ask their child what she learned about oral health in Head Start that day.

- Offering parents suggestions for at-home activities that support what children are learning about oral health in Head Start.
- **Participate in or create oral health campaigns and programs.** Each February, the American Dental Association offers educational materials in English and Spanish to celebrate [National Children's Dental Health Month](#). Other groups like the Ad Council's [2MIN2X](#) campaign and Sesame Workshop's [Healthy Teeth, Healthy Me](#) initiative offer resources like videos, tip sheets, and quick facts in English and Spanish. And many state health departments sponsor campaigns with resources available to the public. Head Start staff can use materials from these and other sources in classrooms and during socialization, home visits, parent meetings, and other events to stress the importance of oral health.

Cook's Corner: Strawberry Hearts with Yogurt Dip

Here's a delicious healthy snack that children can make as a class project or at home with their families.

Ingredients

- 1 pint fresh strawberries
- ½ cup low-fat Greek yogurt

Directions

1. Wash and dry the strawberries.
2. Cut each strawberry in half.
3. Use the tip of the knife to cut the top of the strawberry half in a V-shape and remove the stem and leaves.
4. Put the yogurt in a bowl for dipping.

Safety tip: An adult should slice ingredients.



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Read all issues of *Brush Up on Oral Health* at [Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center](#).

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