THE NATIONAL CENTER ON Health

Brush Up on Oral Health

March 2014

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Did You Know?

- Nearly 25 percent of children under age 6 and who are enrolled in Medicaid have not had a dental visit for preventive care.
- Healthy primary (baby) teeth are very important. They help children chew food, talk, and have good self-esteem.

Talking with Children About Dental Visits

Past dental visits and what young children hear about visits affects their idea of what upcoming visits will be like. If children have had bad experiences, they may be unwilling to go for another visit. Also, when children hear about bad things that may happen to them during the visit or about bad things that happened to others, they may feel afraid of visiting the dentist or dental hygienist.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* provides strategies that Head Start staff can share with parents to prepare young children in a positive way for dental visits.

Photo Source: U.S. Coast Guard | Foter

Strategies for Head Start Staff to Share with Parents to Prepare Children for Dental Visits

- **Keep it short and simple**. Sharing too much information about dental visits may confuse and worry children. If children ask what will happen during the visit, dentists and dental hygienists recommend using short, simple explanations. For example, suggest that parents say "the dental hygienist will count how many teeth you have." Tell them not to say "the dentist will use a sharp tool to look for holes in your teeth."

- **Don't bring up possible pain**. Dentists and dental hygienists know how to keep sharp tools out of children's sight. And most children barely feel shots. But many children worry about getting shots or having their teeth drilled during a dental visit. If the child asks if he or she is going to get a shot, suggest that parents say "I don't know, but we can ask the dentist or dental hygienist."

- **Focus on the positive**. Visiting the dentist or dental hygienist is easy and painless for most children. Usually, visits don't take long. If children ask about what will happen during a visit, encourage parents to talk about positive things. For example, they can say:

  - "The dentist will see what a good job you do to take care of your teeth."

  - "When you leave the dental office, your teeth will be shiny and bright!"

- **Keep your fears to yourself**. If parents dislike dental visits, tell them to not to share their feelings with children. Hearing about adults' fear can make children feel afraid of visiting the dentist or dental hygienist too.

- **Role-play visiting the dentist and dental hygienist**. Parents can have their children dress up and role-play that they are dentists or dental hygienists. Children can use white shirts as lab coats, paper napkins as patient bibs, and coffee filters and yarn as masks. Let children pretend to examine and count their parents', sisters', or brothers' teeth.

- **Read books or watch videos together**. Encourage parents to use age-appropriate books and videos about visiting the dental office. Remind parents to preview them before reading or watching them with their children. Books or videos that contain words like hurt, pain, shot, drill, or any other words that may frighten children should not be used. Ask a children's librarian, dentist, dental hygienist, or early childhood education expert to suggest one or two good books and videos about visiting the dental office.

  The Sesame Workshop's *Healthy Teeth, Healthy Me* has many materials in *English* and *Spanish* that can help prepare children for a dental visit in a positive way. The PBS Parents web page *Talking with Kids about Health: Going to the Doctor & Dentist* has good tips in *English* and *Spanish* on what to say to children before and during a dental visit.

- **Make dental visits fun**. Encourage parents to have children bring a favorite stuffed animal or blanket to the dental visit. Also, suggest that parents plan a fun activity after the visit.

Cook's Corner: Toasted Shamrock Rounds

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

Ingredients

1 green pepper

6 English muffin halves

6 thin slices of low-fat cheddar cheese

Directions

1. Wash and dry the green pepper.
2. Cut off the top of the green pepper and remove the seeds from the inside.
3. Cut the green pepper crosswise near the pointed end to get 6 thin shamrock shapes.
4. Cut the remaining green pepper near the stem into thin slices.
5. Toast the English muffin halves.
6. Put a slice of cheese and a slice of green pepper on top of each English muffin half.
7. Place the English muffins on a tray, then broil in the oven until the cheese is melted.

Makes 6 servings

Safety tips: An adult should slice the ingredients and broil the shamrock rounds in the oven.

Contact Us

National Center on Health *Brush Up on Oral Health* Newsletter Staff

Katrina Holt: kholt@georgetown.edu • (202) 784-9551

Sarah Kolo: sk22@georgetown.edu • (202) 784-9553

Beth Lowe: eal38@georgetown.edu • (202) 687-1864

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School readiness begins with health!