



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Health



# Brush Up on Oral Health

April 2015

Did You Know?

- **American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Culture and Tradition**
  - **AIAN Children and Oral Health**
  - **Strategies Head Start Staff Can Use to Help Engage AIAN Parents in Their Child's Oral Health**
  - **Classroom Circle Brushing in Head Start Programs**
  - **Cook's Corner: Berries**
- About 5.2 million people in the United States identify as AIAN.
  - There are more than 560 federally recognized AIAN tribes in the United States.
  - More than 37,000 AIAN children are enrolled in Head Start programs in the United States.

## American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Culture and Tradition



American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) people belong to tribes or are connected to groups that trace their origins to the first peoples of the Americas. AIAN people generally refer to themselves by their tribes.

Culture is important to AIAN people. Each tribe has its own values, beliefs, and practices. Head Start staff who pay attention to and respect AIAN values, beliefs, and practices will find it easier to engage AIAN families in all areas of health. See the [March 2013](#) issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* for background information on cultural and linguistic competence.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* highlights some of the oral health issues faced by AIAN children. It offers culturally appropriate strategies to help AIAN parents and other caregivers improve children's oral health. A description of a healthy snack that can be eaten in the Head Start classroom or at home is also included.

## AIAN Children and Oral Health

- Tooth decay rates in AIAN children are almost twice as high as in non-AIAN children.
- More than 35 percent of AIAN children ages 1 to 5 have untreated tooth decay.

- AIAN children ages 1 to 5 have the highest rates of tooth decay in the United States.

The reasons that AIAN children are at high risk for developing tooth decay are not fully understood. However, AIAN children with tooth decay tend to have severe tooth decay that makes providing oral health care complicated. If a child has severe tooth decay, he or she may need to be treated in the hospital operating room under general anesthesia. Or the child may need many visits to the dental office to complete his or her oral health care.

## Strategies Head Start Staff Can Use to Help Engage AIAN Parents in Their Child's Oral Health

Here are some culturally appropriate strategies to help engage AIAN parents in their child's oral health.



- **Be respectful.** Learn about each family's tribe and its customs to begin building a relationship with the family. Trust is often built slowly, but without trust, it is virtually impossible to engage parents. A great way to start the process is to ask about what the family does in its free time to identify a point of pride from which to build a relationship.
- **Tell stories.** AIAN communities often use stories to engage, educate, and entertain. Try to weave stories about oral health into family meetings. Telling parents a story about how other parents improved their children's oral health may motivate the parents to do the same with their child. The National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Research's booklet, [A Healthy Mouth for Your Baby \(for American Indians and Alaska Natives\)](#), uses storytelling to teach parents about oral health for babies.
- **Use humor.** Humor plays a key role in AIAN lives. Telling a funny story or laughing at yourself is part of being authentic (real) within AIAN communities. Using gentle humor preserves a person's ego, releases emotions, and diffuses tension as you begin addressing potentially difficult challenges.
- **Include extended family members.** Extended family has a strong influence on many activities and customs of AIAN communities. It is important to engage extended family in the relationship-building process. Let parents know that others are welcome to join meetings or other activities designed to improve oral health.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service's [CultureCard: A Guide to Build Cultural Awareness—American Indian and Alaska Native](#) provides basic information to enhance cultural competence when serving AIAN communities.

## Classroom Circle Brushing in Head Start Programs

The circle plays an important role in the lives of AIAN families. The talking circle is an AIAN custom that allows a group to openly talk about a topic without being judged. Talking circles have been used successfully to improve health.

The Indian Health Service Head Start program's [Classroom Circle Brushing: Quick Reference Guide](#) provides instructions on how to do circle brushing in the classroom. Circle brushing is an excellent way to include adults in toothbrushing and allows teachers to remind children to brush all sides of every tooth. Circle brushing can be effective in any Head Start program, regardless of the racial and ethnic makeup of the children in the program.

## Cook's Corner: Berries

AIAN tribes have harvested berries and eaten them as snacks for many generations. Here are some common berries that can be eaten alone or combined for a delicious, healthy snack that children can eat in the classroom or at home with their families.

- Blackberries
- Blueberries
- Chokecherries
- Dewberries
- Huckleberries
- Mulberries
- Raspberries
- Salmonberries
- Strawberries



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