



Brush Up on Oral Health

Using Culturally Responsive Practices to Promote Oral Health

Parents bring a wealth of strengths that stem from their cultures — beliefs, values, and behaviors — that shape their way of life. Parents' cultural practices influence how they take care of their children.

Sometimes parents must adapt to different ways of doing things when it comes to their children's health. To support families effectively, Head Start staff must recognize and appreciate families' cultural practices that impact oral health.



This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet defines and focuses on culturally responsive practices and how staff can help parents promote their children's oral health.

Culturally Responsive Practices in Health: What Are They?

Culturally responsive practices incorporate the beliefs, values, and behaviors of families' social and cultural backgrounds so health information is relevant to them. These practices strengthen relationships between staff and families.

Head Start staff must recognize the similarities and differences between their own cultural beliefs and values about health and families' cultural beliefs and values about health. Knowing the similarities and differences, staff are better able to understand how families approach oral health and how to engage with families in finding ways to improve oral health. For example, some families don't believe that primary (baby) teeth are important. When Head Start staff recognize this, they can tailor messages to help parents understand the link between healthy primary teeth and a lifetime of good oral health.

Tips for Culturally Responsive Practices in Oral Health

- **Recognize and celebrate cultural diversity.** Families and communities have their own cultural practices and beliefs about children's health, including oral health. To strengthen the program's responsiveness, Head Start staff can invite diverse community members to serve on the program's health services advisory committee or share information during staff in-service trainings.

- **Create a welcoming environment.**

Fostering a culturally inclusive environment encourages parents to share information about their oral health. Engaging in positive interactions with parents can promote a feeling of being understood and valued. In addition, it may be helpful to recruit peer health promoters, bilingual/bicultural staff, or trained interpreters or translators to participate in meetings with parents. Head Start staff can use resources such as the National Center for Cultural Competence's [**A Guide to Choosing and Adapting Culturally and Linguistically Competent Health Promotion Materials**](#) to adapt oral health messages and materials for parents.



- **Listen respectfully.** Fully listening to parents is one of the most respectful things Head Start staff can do. Respectful listening techniques, such as [**motivational interviewing**](#), can help staff understand parents' oral health needs.
- **Involve parents and other family members.** Parents and other family members, including extended family members, play an important role in influencing behaviors that affect a child's oral health. Therefore, to promote a child's oral health, it is important to include parents and other influential family members in discussions and in the decision-making process.

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