



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health

Brush Up on Oral Health

November 2014

Did You Know?

- **Parents' Role in Oral Health**
- **Helping Parents Choose to Make Healthy Behavior Changes**
- **Cook's Corner: Thanksgiving Pumpkins**

The [National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#) offers resources to strengthen families, programs, and communities in their support of young children's growth and development.

Parents' Role in Oral Health



Children of parents who value, reinforce, and model healthy oral health habits are more likely to have good oral and overall health.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* talks about helping parents choose to make healthy behavior changes that will improve their child's oral health. It also includes a recipe for a healthy snack that can be made in the Head Start classroom or at home.

Helping Parents Choose to Make Healthy Behavior Changes

Talking with parents about their goals for their child and helping them find their own reasons for choosing healthy behaviors is one way to inspire them to improve their child's oral health. The following steps, which are based on motivational interviewing techniques, can help engage parents.

1. **Be prepared to talk about the family's oral health needs.** Review health records, teachers' observations, and what you know about parents' attitudes, behaviors, interests, and goals to understand the family's oral health needs. For example, does the child's oral health form show that treatment is needed? Have parents shared that they do not need to take care of their baby's teeth because they are "only baby teeth?" Have parents shared that they do not brush their child's teeth at bedtime? Understanding the family's needs can help you guide and support parents toward making choices to improve their child's oral health.

2. Ask for permission to discuss oral health. Asking for permission to discuss and share oral health information shows you respect them. You might begin by asking parents if they would like to hear about some new information on children's oral health. If they agree, keep your message simple. This approach promotes a partnership and helps parents understand that you appreciate their role as their child's caretaker and decision maker.

3. Start a conversation with parents using open-ended questions. Begin to build parents' trust by asking questions that promote conversation. Ask questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer. For example, you might ask a parent, "Tell me what you would like for your child's oral health." or "Tell me about your child's mouth cleaning routine," instead of "Do you brush your child's teeth twice a day." Listen carefully to their answers. Do not judge or confront parents about their answers. This approach helps you learn about what parents want for their child. It also helps identify what motivates parents and if there are barriers to good oral health.

4. Assess parents' readiness for change. Listen for parents' responses that show a willingness to change current oral health behaviors. For example, if a parent says, "I think brushing my child's teeth twice a day would be good." You might respond with, "How would you include brushing in your daily schedule?" Parents are more likely to change behavior when they have chosen what to change and how it will be done. Problem solving any barriers together reinforces the Head Start staff and parent partnership.

5. Recognize parents' strengths and challenges. Acknowledge parents' strengths and challenges in caring for their child's oral health. For example, when a parent says that they don't know how they can fit toothbrushing into the bedtime routine, restate their challenge by saying, "Getting a child ready for bed can be tough." When you restate what was said, it lets parents know that you hear and understand their strengths and challenges in caring for their child. This approach helps you develop a relationship and continue to build parents' trust.

6. Build parents' confidence. Keep listening to parents and affirming the healthy behaviors they practice. Guide them by asking them to choose one or two ideas they would like to try to improve their child's oral health. For example, the parents might suggest getting the child ready for bed 10 minutes earlier so there's time for brushing. Offer some options if parents can't come up with any ideas. Check how confident parents are that they can make the change. Help them problem solve any challenges they are having. This approach makes parents more confident that they can improve their child's oral health.



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- 7. Summarize the discussion and action plan.** Review the information you talked about. Go over the changes that parents agreed to work on. Affirm that their action plan is a good one and use positive examples from earlier efforts to build their confidence. Ask if you can check in with them later to see how things are working out. Reinforce your partnership by letting them know they can contact you if they need help putting their plan into action.

Using effective motivational interviewing techniques requires training and practice that can include roleplaying. The University of North Carolina's [Tooth Talk](#) website offers two videos: [Motivational Interviewing for Kids' Healthy Smiles](#) and [Tooth Talk Moments](#). The videos demonstrate how to use motivational interviewing to engage parents. *Tooth Talk Moments* offers a more in-depth introduction to this technique.

The [Oral Health Self-Management Goals for Parents and Caregivers](#) worksheet is available to remind parents about the healthy behavior they chose to work on. It also is offered in [Spanish \(español\)](#).

Cook's Corner: Thanksgiving Pumpkins

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

Ingredients

One clementine, orange, or tangerine
Two celery stalks, cut into thin strips

Directions

1. Peel the clementine, orange, or tangerine
2. Push a celery stick into the center of the clementine, orange, or tangerine

Safety tip: An adult should slice ingredients.



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School readiness begins with health!