



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health

Brush Up on Oral Health

September 2015

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Did You Know?

- In the United States, 28 percent of children ages 2–5 have tooth decay.
- Tooth decay gets worse if it is not treated.
- Compared with parents with higher incomes, parents with low incomes have a harder time finding oral health care for their child.



School Readiness

The Office of Head Start defines school readiness as children having the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and for later learning and life. School readiness begins with health, as a child needs to be healthy to grow and learn. Oral health is an important part of overall health. Head Start programs can promote oral disease prevention and support children's oral health and overall health, which will help children be ready for school.

This issue describes the impact of oral health on school readiness and provides resources Head Start staff can use to help improve the oral health of children enrolled in Head Start. A recipe for a healthy snack that can be made in the Head Start classroom or at home is also included.

How Oral Health Impacts School Readiness

- **Pain.** Tooth decay can cause intense pain. This, in turn, can result in anxiety, fatigue, irritability, depression, and withdrawal from normal activities.
- **Attention.** Tooth decay can cause increased inattention and distractibility. This may lead to school failure.
- **Social Interaction.** Children with severe tooth decay are less likely to smile and interact with others. These children may also disrupt activities in the classroom and other settings because they are in pain.

- **Low Self-Esteem.** Children with visible tooth decay are more likely than those with healthy teeth to be teased. This can make children feel sad and become shy.
- **Infection.** Left untreated, the pain and infection caused by tooth decay can result in problems with eating, speaking, and learning.
- **Nutrition.** Tooth decay can cause decreased appetite, leading to poor nutrition. Poor nutrition during childhood can negatively affect the way children’s brains develop. It can also negatively affect children’s school performance, ability to concentrate and perform complex tasks, and behavior.
- **Tooth Loss.** Early tooth loss from tooth decay can result in failure to thrive, poor speech development, and low self-esteem.
- **Missed School Days.** Children with tooth decay miss more school than those without tooth decay. Missing school because of oral pain or infection negatively affects children’s school performance.

Resources to Help Improve Children’s Oral Health

A variety of oral health resources are available on the [National Center on Health](#) oral health webpages, which are part of the [Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center](#).

- **[Brush Up on Oral Health](#).** This monthly newsletter provides Head Start staff with information about current practice, practical tips for promoting oral health, and recipes for healthy snacks. Topics include oral health promotion and disease prevention, family engagement, cultural competence, oral health literacy, and integration of oral health into program curricula and activities.
- **[Healthy Habits for Happy Smiles](#).** This series of handouts for pregnant women and parents provides simple tips on oral health issues. Topics include taking care of pregnant women’s oral health, managing teething pain, brushing children’s teeth, tips for brushing the teeth of children with disabilities, choosing healthy drinks, getting fluoride, preventing oral injuries, giving first aid for oral injuries, and finding a dental clinic. The series is available in English and Spanish.
- **[Oral Health Forms](#).** Completed by a child’s and pregnant woman’s oral health provider, these forms provide Head Start staff with information on the child’s or pregnant woman’s dental home and current oral health status. The forms also identify the services delivered during the dental visit.
- **[Oral Health Assessment, Follow-Up, and Treatment](#).** This webpage lists resources to help ensure that children receive oral health assessments, follow-up, and treatment. Issues addressed include dental homes, children with special health care needs, health



promotion and disease prevention, and Individual Family Service Plans and Individualized Education Programs.

- [Oral Health Education Activities](#). This webpage offers resources to help provide oral health education to pregnant women, children, and their families. Topics include dental visits, fluoride, nutrition, oral hygiene, and safety and emergency first aid.
- [Oral Health Policies and Procedures](#). This webpage highlights resources to establish and implement oral health activities in Head Start classrooms and other settings. Topics include feeding and eating practices, oral hygiene, and safety practices and emergency first aid.

Cook's Corner: Watermelon Pizza

Here is a delicious healthy snack that children can make in a Head Start classroom or at home with their families.

Ingredients

1/8 inch round from a medium-size watermelon

Fresh fruit such as sliced bananas, kiwi, strawberries, grapes, or blueberries

Fresh mint, torn into small pieces (optional)

Feta cheese, crumbled into small pieces (optional)

Directions

1. Lay watermelon round on a cutting board
2. Add toppings
3. Slice watermelon round into pizza-shaped triangles.

Safety Tip: An adult should slice the ingredients.



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The National Center on Health welcomes your feedback on this newsletter issue, as well as your suggestions for topics for future issues. Please forward your comments to nchinfo@aap.org or call 1-888-227-5125.

Subscribe or view all issues of [Brush Up on Oral Health](#) on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center.

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School readiness begins with health!