



Brush Up on Oral Health

June 2016

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Did You Know?

Children living in rural areas are less likely to get oral health care than children living in cities and suburbs.

Families living in rural areas depend more on hospital emergency departments for oral health care than families living in cities and suburbs.

Oral Health in Rural Areas



For pregnant women and children living in rural areas, maintaining good oral health can be a challenge. Families living in rural areas may have trouble accessing the care they need to prevent and treat tooth decay and other oral diseases.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* identifies some oral health challenges faced by families living in rural areas. It offers tips for Head Start staff to help families overcome the challenges. A recipe for a healthy snack that can be made in a Head Start classroom or at home is also included.

Challenges Faced by Families in Rural Areas

Many of the reasons families living in rural areas have trouble accessing oral health care are the same as reasons faced by families living in cities and suburbs. However, there are a number of reasons that are more common in rural areas than in urban areas. Some of these reasons include:

- **Fewer oral health providers.** There are fewer oral health providers in rural areas compared with cities and suburbs. This is especially true with pediatric dentists and other oral health specialists. Also, there are fewer community dental clinics that provide low-cost care in rural areas. To get oral health care, families may have to travel long distances.
- **Lack of access to fluoridated water.** Many families living in rural areas drink private well water that may not contain the right level of fluoride to prevent tooth decay. Other families live in small communities that may not have a fluoridated public water supply.
- **Lack of transportation.** Cabs or public transportation, such as buses or trains, may be limited or unavailable in rural areas. This can make it difficult to get to dental appointments.

- **Added expenses.** Parents may have to take time off without pay, pay for child care for siblings, and/or spend money on gas to bring their child to a dental visit. If the dental office is far away, it takes longer for parents to bring their child for a dental visit, so expenses are higher.

Tips for Head Start Staff to Help Families

Head Start staff can help pregnant women and children access oral health care. Some ways to help include:



- **Make a referral list.** Contact oral health providers in the area and ask if they accept pregnant women and children enrolled in Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Check [Find a Dentist for Your Kid](#) to locate oral health providers who accept Medicaid and CHIP. Also, ask your local health department or [state or regional primary care association](#) to provide a list of university-based dental schools or community dental clinics. Update the list regularly. Share it with families who are having trouble finding a dentist.
- **Contact your state dental hygienist liaison (DHL).** DHLs work with local organizations to help families find and access oral health care. To contact the DHL in your state, send a message to health@ecetta.info.
- **Add oral health providers to the health advisory committee.** Health advisory committee meetings are ideal opportunities to encourage parents, Head Start staff, and oral health providers to discuss challenges to accessing oral health care. If oral health providers attend these meetings, they will see Head Start's commitment to oral health. They may then encourage other local oral health providers to accept pregnant women and children enrolled in Medicaid or CHIP.
- **Provide oral health education.** Offer education sessions to help families learn about the importance of oral health. Pick a time when parents are likely to be free and a place that is easy to get to. Be creative, and make the sessions fun. Serve healthy snacks. Ask for donations that can be used as door prizes. Events that involve both parents and children in activities are most effective.
- **Ask about mobile oral health programs.** Find out if a mobile van or a school-based oral health program serves the rural area. Also, see if any oral health providers offer services in the area using portable equipment. Ask these oral health providers if they would serve the Head Start program.
- **Offer transportation to dental visits.** Arrange to take several children for a dental visit in a van. This takes care of issues parents may have with transportation or added expenses. It also allows oral health providers to serve several children in a short time frame.
- **Find out if the family's drinking water has the right amount of fluoride to prevent tooth decay.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [My Water's Fluoride](#) website lists communities that add fluoride to their water supply. If the family drinks well water, contact the local, county, or state health department's office of oral health to find out how to test well water for fluoride. If the fluoride level is too low, ask an oral health provider or the child's physician to prescribe fluoride supplements.

Cook's Corner: Orange Slushes

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

Makes 6–8 servings

Ingredients

- 20 ice cubes
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup plain low-fat or non-fat yogurt
- 2 cups orange juice



Directions

1. Put the ice cubes in the blender.
2. Add the vanilla extract, yogurt, and orange juice.
3. Blend on high for about 1 minute or until the drink is well mixed.

Contact Us

The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback on this newsletter issue, as well as your suggestions for topics for future issues. Please forward your comments to health@ecetta.info or call 866-763-6481.

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School readiness begins with health!



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