

## **Discussing Oral Health with Parents of Children Who Have Dental Cavities**

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### **Traditional health education**

Typically when we talk with parents we tend to give advice. We tell them how important it is to take the child to the dentist. We leave posters and pamphlets. We hope they will do the right thing. Often this approach does not work.

### **Motivational interviewing (MI)**

Motivational interviewing is a different way to talk with parents. We are trying to motivate parents to take their children to the dentist. It consists of several steps shown below. It has been shown to be very successful in getting families to go to the dentist.

When you use motivational interviewing you try to:

- Develop a relationship with the family so they trust you (many FSW already have this personal relationship).
- Ask open ended questions to find out what the parent's oral health wishes are for their child.
- Present a list of things parents can do to help their children reach the oral health goal stated by parent.
- Have open ended discussion about the options.
- Ask if the parent is ready to choose one thing that could help bring their child closer to the oral health goal the parent stated.
- Help parent identify potential problems in following through with the activity they chose. Help the parent figure out the solutions to the problems (do not problem solve FOR the parent).

### **A Script for Oral Health Motivational Interviewing**

#### **Get to know the mother and encourage her to talk about oral health**

1. Do you have any other children besides (child's name)?
2. Tell me about (child's name).
3. I wanted to talk about (child's name) teeth today because healthy teeth are important part of overall health.

- a. What was it like when your child got his/her first teeth?
  - b. Have you received any information about caring for your children's teeth?
  - c. What do you want for your child's teeth for the future? **OR** Is there anything about Timmy's teeth that you would like to change?
  - d. What is your worst fear about your child's teeth?
4. I see. So if I understand you correctly you hope that \_\_\_\_\_ and your biggest fear is \_\_\_\_\_. Is that correct? Let's make a note of that in (child's name) record so we can both remember that.

### **Discuss what you know about the child's dental health**

1. I know that the dentist/hygienist has discovered that your child has some cavities. You told me that. How do you feel about this? (Use reflective listening and repeat the parent's responses to get them to talk more about their feelings).
2. It sounds as if you are not concerned as these are baby teeth. You know, lots of people feel this way. I didn't know how important baby teeth were until we got a special training on them at the center. Some of what I learned was really surprising.
3. Can I share with you some of the things I learned? (If the parent gives you "permission" to share the information she is more likely to listen and it also shows respect to the parent).
  - a. I learned that children with cavities may be in pain but they often do not tell us. Also, untreated cavities, even in baby teeth, can lead to serious infections that can need emergency treatment.
  - b. Cavities in baby teeth lead to more cavities in permanent teeth.
  - c. If baby teeth do not get fixed they may need to be pulled out. This means the permanent teeth will not have enough room and your child's teeth may end up crooked and without enough space.
4. Were you surprised by any of these facts? Which one concerns you the most? So you're concerned about \_\_\_\_\_.
5. I remember you said earlier that you would worry about permanent teeth – given these new ideas, what are your thoughts on (child's name) cavities?
6. How do you think we can help (child's name) deal with the cavities he has now so that he can have healthy permanent teeth.

### **Start a discussion of the things that the mother can do to help achieve her wish for the child.**

1. In order to (describe what mother's wish is), I want to share some things we know that can help. Let's take a look at the list and discuss the ideas.

- Take your child to the dentist to get their teeth fixed
- Brush your child's teeth every night with a toothbrush and a small pea sized amount of fluoride toothpaste for children over two years and a smear for children under two years

- Have your child only drink plain white milk or water between meals
- Make sure your child only has one snack between meals and make sure it is sugar free.
- Don't put your baby/child to bed with the bottle or sippy cup.

2. Now that you have looked at the ideas on the list, which of these do you think will be the best for you and your child?"
3. You think (restate ones selected) will work for your family?
4. What do you think you will need to make these work?
5. Can we come up with a plan? (Listen to parent and write down steps he/she identifies. You may want to restate some of the steps and clarify when needed. For example – I understand you want to brush child's teeth once a day – what time of day do you think will work best? Then re-state.)
6. Review plan, together.
7. Is this the right plan for your family?
8. Okay, now we have a plan. How can I help with your plan? (Write down the things you need to do).

**For the mother that did not choose getting their child's cavities fixed as an option**

1. Tell me about your choice to not get your child's cavities fixed.
2. Use reflective listening – restate and or ask for more information about her choice. Revisit some of the information used above as necessary.

**Remember**

**A family will not follow through with a behavior unless *they* chose to participate.  
Your goal is to help them reach their own correct decision.**