



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Health and Wellness



Establishing a Dental Home

What is a Dental Home?

A dental home is a dental practice that delivers oral health care in a comprehensive, continuously accessible, coordinated, and family-centered way. The dental home should be established by the time a child is 12 months old—this helps children and their families establish a lifetime of good oral health. A dental home provides:

- culturally competent and family-focused care
- education about diet and developmental issues that affect a child's oral health
- oral health assessment and care that is comprehensive and preventive
- plans for addressing dental, head, and facial injuries

- emergency oral care
- referrals to specialists when necessary

Helping children and pregnant woman establish a dental home is an important service provided by Head Start staff.

The Importance of Oral Health For Children and Pregnant Women

The best way to a bright, confident smile, and healthy teeth is good oral hygiene that includes gum care, brushing, flossing, and healthy eating habits. Preventing cavities is cheaper and more effective than treating cavities once they occur. But good oral health leads to more than a nice smile. A child's oral health also affects general health and even academic success.



Early dental visits teach a child that oral health is important. A child who is taken for dental visits early in life is more likely to have a good attitude about oral health and dental visits. Children should see a dentist when their first tooth erupts or by the time they are 12 months.

Dental caries (also called tooth decay or cavities) results from an infection. Infection causes stress in the body. Negative effects associated with poor oral hygiene in early childhood include a higher risk for:

- future decay in permanent teeth
- hospitalizations and emergency room visits
- high treatment costs
- missed school
- a decreased ability to learn

Periodontitis (an infection of the gums often resulting from long term poor oral hygiene) in adults is associated with diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Establishing a dental home early in life improves lifelong oral health, helps children succeed in school, and prevents future health problems.

Pregnancy is a uniquely important time to begin caring for a child's oral health. Dental caries is caused by bacteria that consume simple sugars and carbohydrates, and leave an acid on teeth that leads to tartar formation. These bacteria are passed from mother to child via saliva. A mother who practices good oral hygiene has fewer of the bacteria that cause tooth decay and is less likely to pass on these cavity-causing bacteria to their infants.

Another reason to encourage pregnant women to establish a dental home for themselves is that women who have periodontitis are more likely to have a low birth weight baby.

How Head Start Programs Support Oral Health

In addition to assisting children with brushing teeth and providing healthy low-sugar meals and snacks, Head Start managers can support oral health by:

- Establishing a policy on how to help families establish a dental home.
- Determining the dental services families have access to under your state Medicaid plan. There is high variability among states and health plans. For example, some health plans do not provide dental coverage for pregnant women or for children under age 3.
- Developing and maintaining a list of oral health providers who are willing to provide a dental home for children and pregnant women enrolled in Head Start.
- Creating records verifying that each child and pregnant woman has a dental home.
- Creating records showing recommended treatment was completed and the family or the pregnant woman followed up on referrals.



Working With Oral Health Providers

Health managers, family service coordinators, and home visitors can take several steps to establish dental homes for children and pregnant woman enrolled in Head Start.

- **Build relationships with oral health providers.** Look for opportunities to talk with oral health providers and visit them in their offices. Share information about Head Start and how the program works to improve the oral health of children and pregnant women. Work together to address concerns (for example, work with families to make sure they keep their child's appointment).
- **Ask oral health providers to adopt a Head Start program.** Oral health providers who adopt a program often become Head Start oral health champions and may become dental home providers for children and pregnant women in Head Start.

- **Collaborate with state-based programs.** Nearly every state health department has an oral health program that helps children and pregnant woman find dental homes. Head Start state collaboration offices, other Head Start programs, and state oral health coalitions may also be of assistance in helping establish dental homes.
- **Invite oral health providers to serve on Head Start health services advisory committees.** Tap into oral health providers' knowledge and experience.

For Your Family Newsletter

Tailor the messages below to include in your family newsletter.

Why is oral health so important? Children with good oral health tend to eat well, sleep well, and develop as they should. Children's oral health also makes a big difference in their ability to learn. Children with tooth pain often have a hard time finishing tasks or activities in the classroom. They may act out, be withdrawn, or seem tired or depressed.

Great oral health starts with a dental home.

In a dental home, you and the oral health provider work together to make decisions about care. Establishing a dental home by age 1 or as early as possible is an important step you can take to keep your child healthy and ready to learn.



Other Resources

[National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center](#)

[Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors](#)

Pregnant women should have a dental home, too! Preventing cavities in young children starts with good oral care in mothers. Women with good oral health have fewer of the bacteria that cause cavities. Mothers can pass these bacteria to their children through saliva. Taking care of yourself is also a good way to encourage young children to care for their own teeth.

Resources

Resources Available on ECLKC

Brush Up on Oral Health, November 2019 (Oral Health Case Management)

Brush Up on Oral Health, September 2019 (Oral Health, Overall Health, and Learning)

Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheets

Checklist for Child Care Staff: Best Practices for Good Oral Health

[Oral Health](#) (resources for Head Start staff and families)

[Head Start Collaboration Offices by State](#)



NATIONAL CENTER ON Early Childhood Health and Wellness

View other topics in the Embracing Health and Wellness Series on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/article/embracing-health-wellness-series>

Our Goal: To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within the areas of medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

Contact Us: The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback as well as your suggestions for topics for future resources! Please forward your comments to: health@ecetta.info or call us at 888-227-5125.

School readiness begins with health!