



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Health

# Brush Up on Oral Health

## November 2012

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### Did You Know?

Oral health literacy is more than being able to read. Being oral health literate means that a person is able to find, process, and understand basic information and services needed to make good oral health decisions. Adults with low oral health literacy often:

- Don't know about and don't practice healthy behaviors, like brushing with fluoridated toothpaste, eating healthy foods, or not smoking
- Don't regularly visit the dentist
- Have oral health problems, like tooth decay and gum disease

Because parents are children's first teachers, they are powerful role models. If parents have low oral health literacy, it's more likely that they and their child will have oral health problems.



### Improving Children's Oral Health

Head Start health services are based on the premise that a child must be healthy to be ready to learn. Head Start program performance standards require that Head Start programs, in collaboration with parents, obtain from a health professional a determination of whether the child is up to date on a schedule of age-appropriate preventive and primary health care, which includes oral health care, and obtain or arrange treatment for the child. This issue

of *Brush Up on Oral Health* gives tips on how Head Start staff can work with parents to improve children's oral health.

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## Engaging Parents in Their Child's Oral Health: Why It's Important

Parents' involvement in their child's oral health is key to the child's overall health and well-being. Parents who introduce, reinforce, and model healthy behaviors and values pass them on to their children. If a child has his or her teeth brushed with fluoridated toothpaste every morning and before bedtime, the child is more likely to continue that behavior into adulthood. The same is true for eating healthy foods. Taking their child to the dentist for check-ups and, if needed, for treatment is another important way for parents to be involved in their child's oral health.



Head Start staff should take advantage of opportunities to educate parents about oral health throughout the program year. Some examples are:

- Showing parents how much toothpaste to put on their child's toothbrush
- Showing parents how to brush their child's teeth
- Reviewing simple recipes for healthy snacks to make at home

Head Start staff can also encourage parents to model good oral habits at home, like brushing their own teeth with fluoridated toothpaste twice a day and eating healthy foods.

## Tips for Engaging Parents

It's important for Head Start staff to develop trusting relationships with parents. Useful ideas and resources for working with parents of children who do not meet the oral exam or oral health screening requirements or who do not take their child to the dentist for treatment include:

- [\*Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment: Responsibilities, Perspectives, and Strategies\*](#), produced by the National Center on Parent,

Family, and Community Engagement. The publication contains strategies that can be adapted to oral health.

- Motivational interviewing. This involves carefully listening to parents and involving them in setting goals and making decisions. A [study](#) conducted at Denver’s Great Kids Head Start found that motivational interviewing improved relationships between Head Start staff and parents. The study also found that more children were in compliance with Head Start oral health requirements after motivational interviewing.
- [A Guide for Improving Children’s Oral Health Care: Tools for the Head Start Community](#) is a toolkit developed to help Head Start staff work with dental insurance payers (for example, Medicaid) and oral health professionals in New Jersey to provide oral health services to children enrolled in Head Start. Section III offers role-play and workshop strategies for engaging parents in their child’s oral health care.
- Case-management approaches. These approaches help parents find and use oral health care services. The New Mexico Department of Health’s Office of Oral Health partners with Head Start programs in Santa Fe and Rio Arriba Counties to identify children with oral diseases. If needed, case managers work with parents to enroll their child in the state’s Medicaid or Children’s Health Insurance Program. Case managers also help parents find dental offices or clinics for their child. Case managers continue working with families until a child’s treatment plan is complete.

### **Cook’s Corner: Recipes for Healthy Snacks**

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

#### **Cheese Quesadillas**

##### **Ingredients**

- 1 cup low-fat shredded cheese
- 1/2 cup fat-free refried beans (optional)
- 2 tortillas, made with either corn flour or wheat flour



Photo credit: Wikipedia

##### **Instructions**

1. Place 1 tortilla on a large microwave-safe plate; spread a layer of refried beans on the tortilla, and sprinkle shredded cheese over the beans. (Note: If the beans are not included, then sprinkle the cheese on the tortilla.)

2. Place the second tortilla on top of the cheese layer.
3. Cook in the microwave until the cheese is melted, about 30 seconds to 1 minute. Before serving, check to make sure that the cheese is not too hot. **Safety tip:** If children are too young to read or follow written directions, they are too young to use a microwave without supervision.
4. Cut quesadilla crosswise into pizza-shaped slices.

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