



Brush Up on Oral Health

Accessing Oral Health Care in Rural Areas

Regular dental visits are important. However, some pregnant people and children living in rural communities have trouble accessing oral health services and miss the benefits of good oral health.

This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet presents some challenges pregnant people and children in rural areas face in accessing oral health care. It provides tips Head Start staff can use to develop a plan to help families access oral health care in rural areas.



Identifying Resources and Addressing Challenges in Accessing Oral Health Care in Rural Areas

Pregnant people and parents of children enrolled in Head Start programs in rural areas face many of the same challenges in accessing oral health care as those in cities and suburbs. But these challenges may be harder to address because fewer oral health professionals work in rural areas, and families have to travel longer distances to receive care.

Conducting a community assessment that includes oral health is an important first step for ensuring that pregnant people and children enrolled in Head Start programs receive the oral health services they need. By examining the community's historic, economic, political, and social characteristics, staff learn about the community's resources and challenges for providing care. This information can then be used to design a plan to help families access oral health care.

Developing a Plan to Help Families Access Oral Health Care in Rural Areas

Head Start staff can use the steps below in their community assessment to develop a plan to help families find and use oral health care resources.

- **Review Head Start program information report (PIR) data.** Look at past and current PIR data on oral health to gather information about the oral health needs of pregnant people and children enrolled in your program. Are children receiving an oral exam according to your state dental periodicity schedule? Have pregnant people in your program received an

oral exam within the past 12 months? Are pregnant people and children receiving needed follow-up care?



- **Identify local oral health professionals.** Identify the names and contact information of all of the oral health professionals that serve the community. Include oral health professionals working in private practice, dental schools, school-based programs, mobile programs, community clinics, and local or county health departments. Ask your local health department or state or regional primary care association for the names of oral health professionals.
- **Make a referral list.** Contact all the identified local oral health professionals and ask if they accept pregnant people and children in Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and note this on the list. Update the list regularly and share it with families.
- **Contact your state dental hygienist liaison (DHL).** DHLs can work with program staff to provide strategies to help families find and access oral health care. To contact the DHL in your state, check the [DHL roster](#) or send a message to health@ecetta.info.
- **Ask local oral health professionals to participate in a health services advisory committee (HSAC).** HSAC meetings are ideal opportunities to encourage parents, program staff, and oral health professionals to talk about challenges to and strategies for accessing oral health care. If oral health professionals attend these meetings, they will see the program's and staff's commitment to oral health. They may then encourage other local oral health professionals to accept pregnant people and children in Medicaid or CHIP.
- **Use case-management strategies to help families access care.** Work with pregnant people and parents to develop a plan to overcome barriers to accessing oral health care. This may include arranging appointments, enrolling children in health insurance plans, arranging transportation to dental appointments, or reminding parents to keep their child's appointment.

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