



# Brush Up on Oral Health

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## Engaging Parents in Their Child's Oral Health

Head Start health services are based on the premise that a child must be healthy to be ready to learn. 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 good oral health behaviors and attitudes pass them on to their children.



This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet describes why it is important for parents to be engaged in their child's oral health. It includes strategies and resources Head Start staff can use to engage parents in their child's oral health. A recipe for a healthy snack that can be made in a Head Start classroom or at home is also included.

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

If parents brush a child's teeth with fluoride toothpaste every morning and before bedtime, the child is more likely to continue that behavior into adulthood. In the same way, if parents give their child healthy foods that are good for the teeth, the child is more likely to eat healthy foods as an adult. Also, if parents take their child for dental visits regularly, the child is more likely to seek oral health care as an adult.

Head Start staff can work with parents throughout the program year to help improve their child's oral health. Some ways that staff can do this are:

- Ask parents about their experience taking their child for a dental visit. Discuss any issues or concerns.
- Invite parents to show how they brush their child's teeth, including how much toothpaste they put on the toothbrush. Reinforce good practices and offer suggestions, as needed.
- Suggest that parents make simple, healthy snacks for their child using [Cook's Corner: Recipes for Healthy Snacks](#), a collection of recipes from past issues of Brush Up on Oral Health.
- Encourage parents to model good oral health habits at home, like brushing their own teeth with fluoride toothpaste twice a day and eating healthy foods.

# Strategies and Resources to Help Head Start Staff Engage Parents

Positive relationships between parents and Head Start staff are important for engaging parents in their child's oral health. Useful strategies and resources for improving relationships and working with parents include:

- **Build partnerships.** The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement's [Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families](#) offers tools and strategies to help Head Start staff develop positive, ongoing, and goal-oriented relationships with parents.
- **Use motivational interviewing.** This involves carefully listening to parents and involving them in setting goals and making decisions. The National Center on Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety offers examples of how to use [motivational interviewing strategies](#). These examples can help Head Start staff integrate motivational interviewing into conversations with parents.
- **Provide case management.** This is an approach where Head Start health managers and family service coordinators work with parents to find and access oral health care. The tip sheet [Using Case Management to Improve Oral Health Care](#) describes how Head Start staff and parents can work together to meet children's oral health needs.
- **Increase parents' oral health knowledge and improve their ability to navigate the oral health care system.** Parents who understand the importance of oral health and who are comfortable talking to oral health professionals are more engaged in their child's oral health. The New Jersey Head Start Association's [A Guide for Improving Children's Oral Health Care: Tools for the Head Start Community](#) is a toolkit developed to help Head Start staff improve parents' health literacy and ability to work with their child's oral health professionals. Section III offers role-play and workshop strategies for engaging parents in their child's oral health.



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