



Brush Up on Oral Health

Promoting Oral Health in Head Start Programs and at Home

Teaching children and parents about oral health throughout the program year is a valuable service that Head Start staff provide. Repeating messages reminds children and parents about the importance of keeping their mouth healthy and how to do it.

This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet provides strategies that Head Start staff can use to promote good oral health among children and parents.



Strategies Head Start Staff Can Use to Promote Oral Health

Children and parents learn best when short and simple messages are repeated regularly using various learning methods (for example, see-tell-do). Repeating the same messages in ways that stimulate parents' and children's thinking makes them more likely to value and practice good oral health habits. Here are some examples:

- **Use teaching practices that engage children.** Teaching practices that engage children promote thinking and language development. Engaging children in conversation can help them learn new words, think critically, and answer clearly. Some questions that promote thinking and talking about oral health include:
 - How do you brush your teeth?
 - Why do you brush your teeth?
 - What else can you do to keep your mouth and teeth healthy?
 - What happens if you don't brush your teeth?
 - Tell me about your last visit to the dentist.
- **Integrate oral health into activities.** In addition to daily toothbrushing, Head Start staff can include oral health in math, science, reading, and art activities. Some ideas include:
 - Creating a graph focused on a question, like "How many times do you brush your teeth every day?"
 - Having children separate pictures of foods that are good for oral health from pictures of foods that are high in sugar.

- Helping children learn words by having them match oral-health related pictures, like teeth, toothpaste, and a smile.
- Teaching children to count and learn colors using toothbrushes.
- Reading books with positive oral health messages to children.
- Having children pretend they are visiting a dental office.
- Singing songs about oral health.

Many curricula for children and parents are available at low or no cost; for example, [Oral Health for Maryland's Kids: A Head Start Teacher's Guide for Creating Healthy Smiles](#).

- **Engage parents in promoting oral health at home.**

Ideas include:

- Working with parents to find the best ways to position their child for tooth brushing. Remind parents that young children cannot brush their teeth well until age 7 to 8. It is also important for a parent to brush their child's teeth or help them with brushing.
- Asking parents to take photographs of their child brushing his teeth and helping the child write stories about his experience.
- Helping parents choose and prepare foods that promote good oral health.
- Encouraging parents to ask their child what she learned about oral health in Head Start that day.
- Offering parents suggestions for at-home activities that support what children are learning about oral health in Head Start.

- **Participate in or create oral health campaigns and programs.** Sharing on [social media](#) is a great way to connect with parents and to promote oral health practices with them and their children. The messages focus on toothbrushing twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.

Each February, the American Dental Association offers educational materials in English and Spanish to celebrate [National Children's Dental Health Month](#). Other groups like Sesame Workshop's [Healthy Teeth, Healthy Me](#) initiative offers tips and tools to help parents and children care for their teeth together. And many state health departments sponsor campaigns with resources available to the public.

Head Start staff can use materials from these and other sources in classrooms and during socialization, home visits, parent meetings, and other events to stress the importance of oral health.



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