



How Dentists Can Improve Oral Health for Head Start Participants

Overview

Dentists play an essential role in improving the oral health of Head Start participants. They provide a variety of oral health services that can help promote oral health and prevent oral disease.

This tip sheet provides an overview of the Head Start program and describes why oral health is important for school readiness. It also discusses the oral health services that Head Start programs offer and what dentists can do to help.

What Is the Head Start Program?

The Head Start program was established to support children's growth in a positive learning environment through a variety of early learning and development, health, and family well-being services. The Head Start program is a federal program that awards grants to public agencies, private and for-profit organizations, tribal governments, and school systems to operate Head Start programs in local communities. The program serves over 1 million children from birth to age 5 and expectant parents from families with low incomes in every state, the District of Columbia, and most U.S. territories. Some local Head Start programs

focus on American Indian and Alaska Native and migrant and seasonal farmworker populations.

Throughout the tip sheet, the term "Head Start program" refers to the overarching Head Start program, which includes Early Head Start programs, Head Start programs, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs, and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs.

Why Is Oral Health Important for School Readiness?

School readiness begins with health because a child must be healthy to be ready to learn. School readiness depends on positive physical, social and emotional, language, and cognitive development. Oral health impacts each of these areas and plays an important role in a child's school readiness. Despite improvements in the oral health status of children in the United States, oral health disparities remain. Children enrolled in Head Start programs, like other children from families with low incomes, experience more oral disease (e.g., tooth decay) and have less access to oral health care than children from families with higher incomes.

What Oral Health Services Do Head Start Programs Offer?

The Head Start Program Performance Standards require programs to ensure that children are up to date on the oral health requirements outlined in the dental periodicity schedule of the state Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (EPSDT) program. To do this, staff must consult with parents within 30 days of enrollment to determine whether their child has a source of continuous, accessible oral health care. And within 90 days of enrollment, staff must obtain a determination from an oral health professional on whether the child is up to date with the state dental periodicity schedule. If a child is not up to date, Head Start staff must assist parents in making arrangements to bring the child up to date as quickly as possible.

Head Start programs can be instrumental in providing support and services that families need to improve their life circumstances, and in developing environments where parents are empowered to be their child's first and most important teachers. Parents' involvement in their child's oral health is key to children's overall health and well-being. Head Start programs provide information and resources for parents to help them understand the benefits of good oral health and the importance of establishing a dental home early in their child's life.



The number one health issue among children enrolled in Head Start programs nationwide is access to oral health care.



What Can Dentists Do to Help?

Dentists can work in partnership with [Head Start programs](#) to improve oral health services for children and expectant parents.

Explore tips below for what dentists can do to help.

Increase oral health knowledge and skills

- Take professional development courses to learn how to provide oral health care for children, including children with disabilities, enrolled in Head Start programs. For example, [Special Care: An Oral Health Professional's Guide to Serving Children with Special Health Care Needs](#) addresses the unique oral health needs of children with disabilities in a comprehensive, family-centered, and community-based manner.
- Address [social determinants of health](#) to promote good oral health for Head Start participants and their families. For example, dentists can promote resources to Head Start staff that are tailored to families' commonly spoken languages, cultures, and traditions.

Partner with health professionals and organizations

- Leverage resources from professional oral health associations (e.g., Academy of General Dentistry, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, American Dental Association) at the national, state, and local levels. This can facilitate association members' involvement in Head Start programs. For example:
 - Use electronic communication tools such as the association's website, newsletter, and podcast to



raise awareness about the oral health needs of Head Start program participants.

- Encourage designation of the association's foundation funds for Head Start-related activities.
- Encourage dental schools to require students to work with Head Start programs as part of their education to gain experience with and appreciation for serving families with low incomes and instill a sense of community responsibility.
- Educate medical providers about the importance of conducting oral health screenings, risk assessments, and fluoride varnish and silver diamine fluoride applications and providing anticipatory guidance.

Provide oral health care to Head Start participants

- Provide preventive oral health care, including fluoride varnish and silver diamine fluoride applications, and education in Head Start classrooms, private practice, and other clinical settings.
- Offer oral health care using [teledentistry](#) in communities where accessing oral health care is difficult.
- Follow professional association guidelines on oral health care for young children, including children with disabilities, and expectant parents. Take courses on how to provide oral health care for these populations.

Collaborate with Head Start programs

- Join a [Health Services Advisory Committee](#) composed of families, Head Start staff, health and human service professionals, and other community members to support the program's objective to increase access to health care, including oral health care. For example, committee members can assist in the development and review of policies and procedures (e.g., using teledentistry to perform oral exams).
- Work with Head Start entities at the state level, including the Head Start association and [Head Start Collaboration Office](#), to learn about and develop strategies to address the oral health needs of Head Start participants. For example, encourage collaboration between professional oral health associations and the state Head Start association by sharing information about the Head Start program's commitment to oral health during meetings and other activities.

Serve as a champion for oral health

- Work with policymakers and other stakeholders (e.g., state department of health staff, state Medicaid agency staff, legislators, state Head Start associations) to promote policies that increase access to oral health care for children and expectant parents from families with low incomes, including those enrolled in Head Start programs.



- Advocate for increased **health literacy** and cultural competency training in dental school curricula to improve communication in Head Start and other community-based programs.
- Encourage health professionals to provide oral health care to Head Start participants and to provide referrals to oral health professionals who accept Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.



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