



ARIZONA HEAD START ASSOCIATION

Early Childhood Dental Home Information for Early Childhood Professionals

Oral Health is a critical, but often ignored, component to school readiness. Early tooth loss caused by dental decay can result in failure to thrive, impaired speech development, chronic infection, bad breath, absence from and inability to concentrate in school, and reduced self-esteem. Did you know an estimated 51 million school hours per year are lost because of dental-related illness? (1. Community Voices: HealthCare for the Underserved, 2001). Children experiencing dental pain are distracted and unable to concentrate on their schoolwork.

Young children are often unable to verbalize dental pain. As Early Childhood Educators you may notice a child who is having difficulty attending to tasks or who is demonstrating the effects of pain such as fatigue, irritability, depression and withdrawal from normal activities. This pain may be caused by poor oral health. It will be critical to work with the families to ensure that a child has access to immediate care needs. In addition, Early Childhood Educators can and should work with families to help them understand the need for a dental home that will monitor a child's oral health and provide preventative care.

Knowing that children are more likely to come to school ready to learn when they are healthy, Head Start in collaboration with the dental organizations in Arizona, is working collaboratively to ensure that every child in our state has access to immediate, emergency dental care as well as a dental home. The Early Childhood Dental Home Project brings together early childhood professionals, families of young children, and the dental community to work together to ensure that children have good oral health. Not every dentist has the expertise or desire to work with young children as part of their practice. This project will help you link families with dentists who not only know how to work with young children but are committed to building a relationship with your families and in some cases provide acute dental care at little or no cost to the families.

Another way Early Childhood Educators can help is to teach young children directly about good oral health. Taking time to teach children about oral health may make a big difference in their lives both now and in the future. The National Maternal & Child Oral Health Resource Center recommends that you become an Oral Health Champion by doing the following:

1. Teach your students about nutrition.
2. Encourage children to drink water throughout the day.
3. Avoid using sweets and food as rewards.
4. Know that the bacteria that causes tooth decay can be passed from person to person so be sure to follow Arizona Department of Health Services Child Care Licensing policies.
5. Be a good role model for oral health care.
6. Teach children to brush their teeth.
7. Read stories about going to the dentists.
8. Speak with your students and their families about the importance of dental care and having a dental home!