

Head Start, Parents, and Doctors: A Partnership for Healthy Children

Children and Dental Care

Why is this important?

Have you ever thought or been told that baby teeth are not important? Or, that dental care and treatment for baby teeth are a waste of time because they "fall out anyway?" It is true every child's baby teeth will eventually fall out. But, it is not true that they are not important. It is essential to take care of them until they grow out. Healthy baby teeth are necessary for strong, straight teeth later in life.

In fact, many adult oral health issues stem from problems that occurred during childhood. Instilling good dental care habits at a young age can encourage excellent oral hygiene as an adult; avoiding painful dental problems later in life.

Why we need to advocate for children.

In the United States, the lack of adequate dental care is a serious issue. Currently over 25% of four-year-old children in the United States have cavities. Cavities and other oral health issues are painful and pose serious health risks to children. Helping parents realize the importance of their child's baby teeth and how to keep them healthy is critical. *Head Start Program Performance Standards* (1304.20(a-e)) and the Program Instruction dated December 14, 2006 (Oral Health ACF-PI-HS06-03) are specifically related to dental care.

A great resource for children's dental care and advocacy can be found on the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Web site www.aapd.org.

What can staff do?

Head Start staff can assist in several ways by:

- helping to schedule dental appointments
- assisting with transportation to dental offices
- helping parents plan child care for siblings during dental visits
- accompanying concerned parents to the dental office
- providing translation services

What can parents do?

Start young don't delay!

It is important for children to become familiar with the dentist at a very young age and for parents to choose a family dentist wisely. Often, the first visit to the dentist consists primarily of an examination and possibly a cleaning.



Be respectful.

Parents should arrive on time for appointments. Be courteous by canceling and rescheduling appointments if unable to make them. Follow through with the dentist's recommendations and follow up on appointments to avoid future dental issues.

Attitude is very important!

The thought of going to the dentist may be scary or unpleasant for many parents, especially those who have had a bad experience. Parents may unknowingly pass on their own fears and anxieties to their child. Some tips for anxious parents are:

- Let the child know the dentist is "a friend," not someone to be afraid of.
- Be relaxed during the visit. Make sure not to show signs of fear and tension, such as clutching your child's hand.
- Answer your child's questions simply and truthfully.
- Avoid talking with others about past painful experiences at the dentist in front of your child.
- Never use going to the dentist as a threat with your child, such as, "If you eat too much candy, the dentist will pull out your teeth."

Find a good dentist.

Parents should try to find a dentist who specializes in the care of children's teeth. Recommendations from other parents, asking one's own dentist, or checking with the local dental society are good starting points. A good dentist should not mind answering any questions or allaying parent concerns. Good questions to ask are:

- How will the dentist work to ensure that the child is comfortable sitting in a dentist chair?
- How will the dentist track and monitor the ongoing development of the child's teeth?

To locate a pediatric dentist near you, go to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Web site <http://www.aapd.org/finddentist/search.asp>.