



Brush Up on Oral Health

Oral Health and Children with Disabilities

A disability can affect a child's activities and ability to learn. Some children with disabilities need extra health services and support services.

Children with disabilities are at higher risk for tooth decay and other oral health problems than children without disabilities.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* focuses on oral health challenges that some children with disabilities face and what Head Start staff and parents can do to address these challenges. A recipe for a healthy snack to make in the Head Start classroom or at home is also included.

Did You Know?

- More than 11% of children enrolled in Head Start have a disability that qualifies them for special education and related services.
- These disabilities can include:
 - Autism
 - Speech or language impairments
 - Visual impairments
 - Hearing impairments
 - Developmental delays
 - Intellectual disabilities



Oral Health Challenges for Children with Disabilities

Children with physical disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, may not have the motor skills they need to use a toothbrush safely or to sit still in a dental chair during dental visits.

Children with communication disorders, such as delayed speech and language development, may not be able to tell their parents or Head Start staff that they have a toothache.

Children who get frequent medical care, such as having many medical visits or hospital stays, may be afraid of the dental office and may not cooperate during visits.

Children who take medicines with added sugars or that cause dry mouth are at high risk for tooth decay. Sugar is

added to some medicines to make them taste better. Other medicines used to treat cerebral palsy, seizures, and depression can cause dry mouth by lowering the amount of saliva in the mouth. Saliva plays an important role in preventing tooth decay. Medicines given to children with diseases or disorders, such as asthma or allergies, can also cause dry mouth.

Children on special diets may be at high risk for tooth decay. Foods that are soft or high in starch (for example, potatoes or corn) stick to children's teeth and give bacteria in the mouth more time to cause tooth decay.

Strategies for Head Start Staff to Help Improve the Oral Health of Children with Disabilities



- **Learn more about a child's disability and its impact on oral health.** The National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Research offers information and practical oral care guides for several disabilities. These include:
 - [Practical Oral Care for People with Autism](#)
 - [Practical Oral Care for People with Cerebral Palsy](#)
 - [Practical Oral Care for People with Down Syndrome](#)
 - [Practical Oral Care for People with Intellectual Disability](#)
- **Give children with disabilities extra support in the classroom.** Make sure children eat food and drink beverages low in sugar and that children's teeth are brushed with fluoridated toothpaste after meals. For children with intellectual disabilities, give them extra time for brushing, if they need it. If needed, for children with physical disabilities make changes to their toothbrushes or to the way teeth are brushed. For children who have a hard time explaining how they feel, help them find ways to express discomfort they may have when brushing their teeth or having their teeth brushed.
- **Help parents understand that their child's disability may put the child at high risk for developing tooth decay.** Share information that can help parents keep their child's mouth healthy and get needed oral health care for their child. See [Healthy Habits for Happy Smiles](#) handouts for parents that are available in English and in [Spanish \(español\)](#).
- **Identify dentists in the community who provide care for children with disabilities.** Recognize that parents may have a hard time finding a dentist willing to provide care for their child, and help parents find a dentist. Look for pediatric dentists who have special education and training on caring for children with disabilities.
- **Work with parents to complete the form [Getting to Know Me: Information for Your Child's Dental Office](#),** available in English and in [Spanish \(español\)](#). The form gathers information about the child's ability to cooperate during dental visits. It also includes suggestions from parents or Head Start staff about approaches that might work best for the child. This information will help the dental office staff understand and meet the child's needs.