

Executive Summary

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) hosted the Region I Forum, “Charting a Future Course: A Regional Forum on Head Start and Oral Health,” on June 10-11, 2004 in Manchester, New Hampshire. The major aim of the Forum was to determine how organizations and agencies at a regional level can work together to improve the oral health of Head Start children and families. This was the ninth in a series of regional forums held as a follow-up to a the 1999 National Head Start and Partners Oral Health Forum convened by the Head Start Bureau (HSB), HRSA, the Health Care Financing Administration (now known as CMS, or the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Over sixty participants attended the Forum representing all the states in the Region and a variety of organizations, agencies, and professional groups from the public, private, and non-profit sectors. During the Forum, they shared their unique experiences and perspectives of Head Start and oral health.

Speakers represented the regional offices of ACF, HRSA, DHHS, Head Start and children’s oral health programs, and included Mr. Brian Cresta, Ms. Louise Eldridge, Mr. Tom Killmurray, Dr. John Rossetti, Dr. Grace Whitney, Dr. Suzanne Boulter, and Dr. Burt Edelstein. The speakers noted the growing oral health disparities, barriers to dental care, and the pivotal role that collaboration and partnerships with Head Start can play in improving oral health outcomes for young children and their families.

Guided by Head Start and Oral Health Partnership Project consultant, Jane Steffensen, the participants met in small groups to discuss three areas—prevention, oral health education, and access to dental care. During the first session each group discussed promising practices and identified priority issues. In the second session each group outlined strategies and action steps, as well as identified collaborators and resources necessary to address priority issues. The next section summarizes these group discussions.

Prevention

After discussion on a number of oral health challenges and opportunities faced by Head Start programs and families, participants identified the following priority issues related to prevention: Head Start protocols and training; parental knowledge and behaviors; dental workforce capacity; appropriate use of fluorides; and influences of the media on consumers. The strategies identified in the work session highlighted the importance of maximizing the internal expertise of the HSB as well as developing relationships with collaborators who would benefit from such partnerships and see the value in promoting oral health initiatives.

Participants identified the following action steps regarding prevention:

- Review current science literature and update national resource guides accordingly.
- Form a work group or task force that can identify best practices and establish benchmarks for protocols and prevention practices specific to Head Start populations.
- Develop partnerships with organizations that see value in improving oral health and that can assist in funding initiatives and campaigns.
- Encourage dentists and dental professionals to incorporate fluoride varnishes into public health programs and dental screening programs.
- Convene task force to resolve issues surrounding funding for well water testing.

Oral Health Education

Participants outlined three priority issues, which included consensus building, message creation, and tools for practitioners and professionals. Some strategies mentioned by participants were the use of peers to deliver education to both physicians and parents; collecting information on target populations, consolidating information and resources in a manner that is easily accessible, and developing a social marketing campaign.

Participants identified the following action steps:

- Administer a survey to Head Start parents to gauge family priorities and parental attitudes toward oral health.

- Develop written agreements with partners and collaborators to encourage a higher level of accountability to improve oral health and enhance oral health education.
- Review existing oral health educational materials and resources and identify best practices used throughout the country. Share this information with Head Start colleagues and peers and at the Head Start program level.
- Train Head Start teachers about oral health. Integrate oral health and nutrition into classroom settings.
- Consult with individuals involved in successful social marketing campaigns such as the “Back to Sleep” SIDS campaign. Promote oral health through the “Ready for School” campaign.
- Ask the regional office to identify foundation and other funding sources for oral health product development and information dissemination.

Access to Dental Care

Issues related to establishment of a dental home, provider capacity and distribution, and the integration of oral health into health care and social service coordination provided by family workers in Head Start were identified as the priority issues during discussion sessions. The strategies identified ways to increase the number of dental providers and promote dental careers and opportunities to integrate oral health into the care coordination process.

Participants identified the following action steps:

- Clarify guidance around the definition of the dental home in Head Start.
- Promote dental health professions to Head Start parents through workforce development initiatives
- Incorporate oral health data into standardized Head Start computer tracking and reporting systems. Share existing oral health data collection tools that can be used effectively by Head Start and oral health programs.
- Reinstate region health manager meeting and communications systems to share information about best practices related to expanding access to dental care. Integrate oral health learning into regional and state Head Start meetings as well as the Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Network.

- Encourage regional attempts to tackle issues underlying lack of provider capacity and inappropriate distribution of professional. Assess and review supply and distribution of dental health providers in the region and make appropriate recommendations.
- Train non-dental health professionals to integrate oral health into their care delivery model.
- Support communication about best practices to increase access to dental care. Include Federal partners (ACF, HRSA, USDA-WIC, CMS, Regional Health Administrator), state, and local programs (e.g., Area Health Education Centers (AHECs), MCHB LEND programs, Regional and State Head Start Associations, Head Start Collaboration Offices, etc.)
- Advocate for oral health funding in HRSA and support HRSA dental consultants in all Regions especially Region I.
- Train Head Start Family Workers and dental providers about effective care coordination and oral health. Enhance cultural competency of dental providers and Head Start family workers through collaboration and understanding of the social, cultural, financial, transportation, geographic factors that can influence access to dental care by Head Start children and their families.
- Support the implementation of innovative programs such as Access to Baby and Child Dentistry (ABCD Model from Washington state) with Head Start programs to increase access to dental care (e.g., prevention and treatment) as well as coordinate dental care with families.

The Regional Forum accomplished its goal of bringing key stakeholders together to build linkages and enhance partnerships to improve oral health in Early Head Start and Head Start. The groups identified specific strategies and action steps that can be implemented by the HSB and its partners. Most significantly, the Regional Office expressed its commitment to the development and implementation of a Regional Action Plan to improve oral health of pregnant women and children in Early Head Start and Head Start.

To access the full report, please visit the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center Web site at www.mchoralhealth.org/HeadStart/hsforums.html.