

Dental Public Health Activity Descriptive Summary

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New Jersey Special Smiles Initiative

Since oral health is the most common unmet health need among children with special health care needs, the NJ Department of Health and Senior Services has developed a new oral health education initiative entitled "New Jersey Special Smiles." This unique education program is targeted to children with special health care needs (CSHCNs) and their caregivers. It is a multi-faceted approach to increase knowledge and awareness of the distinct oral health needs of CSHCNs and how they can be properly managed.

In order to provide printed materials to teachers and caregivers, a newsletter titled, "Special Care Needs" is prepared and distributed to all special needs school districts throughout the State. In addition, the initiative, "Special Smiles" has been developed and implemented in six special service school districts in the southern part of the State. Students in these schools receive an oral health education program conducted by a registered dental hygienist that addresses the importance of good oral health care, especially in brushing and flossing of the teeth.

During the 2011-2012 school year, the initiative has been enhanced to include oral health in-service training for school personnel. As part of the in-service, an oral health pamphlet developed specifically for parents is made available to school staff for distribution to parents/guardians. In addition, each student in the participating classrooms receives a Crest Spin Brush.

An oral health resource packet that addresses the specific oral health care needs of special students has been developed and is also distributed to school nurses. The resource packet contains materials from the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center, New Jersey Dental Clinic Directory, and a copy of "Dental Care Everyday: A Caregiver's Guide" developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Lessons Learned:

- In previous years, the Children's Oral Health Program prepared and distributed an informational/educational oral health newsletter for special needs schools.
- In an effort to better enhance the oral health education needs of these students, the "Special Smiles" initiative was developed and made available during the 2011-2012 school year.
- Enhanced education and outreach efforts will have a greater impact on improving oral health knowledge for caregivers and subsequently, improve the oral health status of special needs populations.
- The initiative is cost effective and easily replicated.

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