

Dental Public Health Activity Descriptive Summary

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Healthy Teeth, Happy Babies

Early childhood dental disease is the most chronic childhood disease in the U.S. and is evident in high numbers in Colorado, yet this disease is nearly always preventable. In Colorado:

- 1/3 of Colorado's children live in low-income households (less than 200% of federal poverty level).
- 14% of one year olds have untreated decay.
- 32% of Head Start kids aged two to five have untreated dental decay.
- 46% of kindergarteners have had cavities and/or fillings.
- 57% of third grade children have had cavities and/or fillings.
- 80% of dental disease occurs in 20% of the population with disproportionate incidence in low-income kids.
- An estimated 7.8 million school hours are lost in Colorado due to oral health pain and infections.
- Few low-income children have regular access to a dentist—only 11% of dentists in Colorado take Medicaid, and lower reimbursement rates are likely to make that number decrease further. **

The Healthy Teeth, Happy Babies public education campaign's goals are to educate new and expecting parents in metro Denver about the connection between parent/baby dental health and motivate preventive behavior change, especially in high-risk (low-income/Hispanic) populations.

Over four years, the campaign has effectively used a series of social marketing tactics:

- Annual research to establish a baseline, identify obstacles, and measure progress
- Partnerships with community/state organizations, medical, dental, other healthcare providers
- Print, broadcast, and outdoor advertising
- Patient education/community outreach
- Media/social-media relations

In 2009, 612 new or expecting mothers in metro Denver were surveyed. The results from 2006-2009 show significant progress:

- Respondents' awareness that tooth-decay can be passed from mother to infant increased from 26% to 78%.
- The biggest increases in behavior change and awareness were made among younger, Hispanic, lower-income, less-educated respondents.
- Among Hispanic mothers who heard the messaging, 58% reported stopping sharing utensils and 43% reported taking their child to a dentist.

The awareness gains (26% to 78%) have been remarkable. The challenge is maintaining awareness while continuing behavior change in high-risk populations. The campaign addressed this by revising brand image with focus on Spanish translation to ensure culturally-relevant messages and strategies.

*** (Source: Colorado Dept. of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) studies in 2004 and 2007, and Impact on Oral Disease on the Health of Coloradans, CDPHE 2005)*

Lessons Learned:

Over the past five years, the campaign's strategy has constantly evolved to maximize effectiveness. If the campaign was to be recreated, the most significant change would be to place a greater emphasis on direct parent interaction from the beginning, in addition to communicating with parents through their trusted healthcare providers.

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