



## “I have a little toothbrush...”

*“I have a little toothbrush, I hold it very tight, I brush my teeth each morning. And then again at night!”*

The children at Southeast Child Development Center learned the song, could recite every word, but the director asked, “Did the children actually do what the song said?” She had her doubts.

After the nurse consultant from DHEC’s Richland County Public Health Department/Richland County First Steps, Susanna Watson, did the DHEC Oral Health 101 Training for the providers at Southeast Child Development Center, Shakeela Aslam, the director, asked for information about the center-based tooth-brushing program that was mentioned in the training. Implementing a tooth-brushing program requires a huge commitment on the part of a center’s director and teachers. It is not an easy undertaking. The nurse consultant reviewed the DHEC guidelines and asked the director to discuss the plan with her teachers to decide if it was something they all felt they could do. With some reluctance the Southeast staff decided to accept the challenge. In order to ensure the cleanliness of the toothbrushes, they must be stored in specially designed holders. DHEC’s Division of Oral Health provided the needed number of holders, and the tooth-brushing program at the Southeast Child Development Center began.



It has been two years since the program was implemented, and it is now a source of pride for the director, the pastor and all members of the staff. The director has noted that parents are reporting that children are now asking to brush their teeth at home. The center’s enrollment is approximately 70 children, so every year the tooth-brushing program is positively impacting this many children and families.

Richland County First Steps played a significant role in spreading the oral health message when it created a Child Care Nurse Consultant position five years ago to address its mission statement, “We will assist children to reach school healthy and ready to learn.” Susanna Watson, a registered nurse, accepted the position in April 2006 DHEC’s Richland County Public Health Department, under contract with Richland County First Steps.

“Children’s health concerns are many, but a large number of children in childcare have untreated oral health problems,” Ms. Watson stated.

She took on this issue by offering the DHEC Oral Health 101 Training to Richland County child care providers, distributing oral health information to parents and teaching children about the importance of brushing their teeth.

The Southeast Child Development Center provides a great example of how to successfully implement a tooth-brushing program. Hopefully more center directors will be encouraged by their success and decide to follow suit. A strong director with a commitment to children’s health is the most influential factor in a establishing a tooth-brushing program. By encouraging her staff to “do it for the children,” Shakeela Aslam, the director, has been able to have a lifetime impact on the oral health of these children in her care. Now when the children sing, “I have a little toothbrush, I hold it very tight...” she can feel confident this is not just another children’s song!