



## Creating Resources and Making Connections: The Impact of the Head Start Dental Home Initiative in South Carolina

### Public Health Problem

Early Childhood Cavities (ECC) is tooth decay that occurs in the baby teeth of children under the age of five. Tooth decay causes pain and infection. Unfortunately, some children live with this pain every day. Studies have shown that early intervention is key in preventing tooth decay. In order to prevent tooth decay in baby teeth, involvement and education must take place before the first cavity develops. One effective strategy is to work with both expectant mothers and young infants before they enter a Head Start Program. Once children enter and participate in Early Head Start/Head Start programs, the focus shifts to preventing future decay in erupting teeth. The concept of a dental home includes outreach to children at greatest risk of disease and also calls for the involvement of professionals in overcoming barriers in accessing care. A strong connection to a dental home is a significant and positive part of the equation, but in many cases one of the biggest challenges.

### Program Overview

A dental home is defined by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentists (AAPD) as a source of continuous, accessible, comprehensive, family-centered, coordinated, compassionate, and culturally effective oral health care delivered or directed by a dentist. In many communities, identifying a dental home in a timely manner can be a challenge, when there are a limited number of dentists who will see children under the age of five or that will accept Medicaid/EPSTDT families. The Head Start Dental Home Initiative, funded by the Office of Head Start and the AAPD until September 2010, tried to address this challenge through funding state-based initiatives. Specifically, the AAPD and Head Start partnered at the national, regional, state, and local level to develop a national network of dentists to link Head Start Children with dental homes. A national network of pediatric dentists and general dentists was created to provide quality dental homes for Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) children; train teams of dentists and HS personnel in optimal oral health care practices; and assist HS programs in obtaining comprehensive services to meet the full range of a child's oral health needs. After October 2010, this initiative was led by the National Head Start Association (NHSA).



South Carolina was fortunate to be part of this project and received funding in 2010. The funds were used to create an Oral Health Tool Kit for Head Start providers as well as a Tool Kit for dental and medical providers. Interestingly, the clinician piece prompted an awareness of the increasing role that pediatricians are beginning to play in addressing oral health issues and their effectiveness in raising parental awareness about the importance of oral health.



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### SC's Oral Health Tool Kit

The Tool Kit is designed to support and strengthen Head Start's existing program goals and objectives by providing Regional Health Coordinators with the resources they need to educate parents and students as well as connect with local providers. Some of the materials included in the kit include over 30 parent information sheets that can be sent home with children to raise awareness and educate parents about specific oral health topics, colorful posters, First Birthday cards promoting the age-one dental visit, screening charts, dental emergency information, books for the classroom and a DVD of key oral health messages. As of July 2012, medical and dental providers have ordered and received over 3100 First Birthday Cards and over 800 oral health posters for display in offices and exam rooms.

### Connecting at the Local Level

Once the Tool Kit was complete, the Division of Oral Health (DOH) staff conducted trainings for the regional health directors and shared ideas on how to use the resources in the Tool Kit to connect with existing and potential providers. Recognizing the importance and significance of making connections with local clinicians, the DOH hosted a community meeting in Walterboro, SC in an effort to bring together medical and dental providers, Head Start staff and community-based outreach programs. The goal of the meeting was to provide a relaxed setting where successes could be celebrated, challenges could be addressed and obstacles could be overcome. The meeting targeted four counties: Colleton, Hampton, Beaufort and Jasper and there was representation from all four counties. The 24 attendees included Head Start staff; medical and dental providers and office staff; health department staff and early interventionists. One of the key results of the meeting, in addition to valuable conversations, was a connection made between a Head Start Center and a local community health center with plans to open a dental clinic. This connection will help the Center get their children served in a location that was a few minutes away instead of having to travel over an hour for services. Opening up the dialogue between groups that are trying to address the needs of children cannot be overstated. It is through these connections and conversations that problems are solved and the needs of children and families are met!