

Head Start in Oral Health

Gabriel Iquite is a three-year old at Head Start in Menlo Park. He sits facing classmates as a dental assistant coaxes him to open wide so that she can take a photo of his teeth with a mirror and a small camera. His classmate demonstrates just how wide and then “takes” his picture.



Virtual Dental Home

With their parent’s consent children at Head Start can receive oral health screening, risk assessment and preventive care. They are part of a pioneering tele-health project referred to as the “Virtual Dental Home.” Instead of a dentist, a specially trained team includes a dental hygienist in advanced practice and a dental assistant who use state-of-the-art diagnostic tools including an intra-oral camera, a hand-held x-ray and a computer. The dental records for Gabriel will be uploaded to a cloud-based electronic site where a dentist at Ravenswood Family Dentistry will review them and recommend a treatment plan if further care is needed.

This 21st century tele-health model of delivering dental services to underserved population is the brainchild of Dr. Paul Glassman, director of the Pacific Center for Special Care at the University of Pacific Dental School. “My focus has been on developing ways to help people who can’t go into a dental office or receive care in a traditional manner.” Among the first populations he worked with were people with developmental disabilities and complex medical problems such as cerebral palsy.

Dr. Yogita Thakur, dental director at Ravenswood Family Dentistry, was familiar with Dr. Glassman’s work. She spearheaded the formation of collaborative partnership with University of Pacific and recruited the Institute for Human and Social Development, which oversees Head Start programs in the County, to develop a way to offer early assessment and prevention in low-income communities where dental decay is the most prevalent chronic condition in children. The two-year project is funded by First Five San Mateo and will enable 525 children enrolled in Head Start and 100 children with special needs in home-based Head Start to receive care.



No fear here

A Head Start pre-school environment is far removed from the stainless steel apparatus-filled dental office that can be daunting for a three or four year old child. What surprises you at Head Start is how at ease the children seem to be. Janelle laughs as the Dental Hygienist prepares her for a teeth cleaning. The hygienist lets her try the water spray and then holds the vibrating dental brush so that it lightly tickles Janelle’s hand before she begins to clean her teeth with it. Finally, she ends the exam by showing Janelle a picture of her teeth on the

computer. From a child's perspective, it becomes an adventure without the fear factor.

Dr. Glassman and Dr. Thakur are pleased about this "happy accident" resulting from the delivery of oral care in the context of Head Start's playful pre-school environment. Dr. Glassman has written a lot about fear of dental care and seen the lifelong negative effects of early dental trauma. "A lot of kids from low-income families only get to see a dentist when they have a bad toothache. When they do go, it's a terrible experience and they learn to be terrified of dentists. Then they won't go back unless they have to. It can set up a lifetime of bad habits and neglect."

Providing children with an early positive dental experience in a setting where they are comfortable is one of the best ways to get people to have a lifetime of dental health. He adds, "I think that's probably as important as anything else we do in this setting."

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