



## **The Head Start Dental Home Initiative**

**Partnering to Provide Dental Homes and Optimal Oral Health for Head Start Children Throughout the U.S.**



**O**ral Health is integral to the healthy physical, social-emotional and intellectual development of every child. Unfortunately, many children in America suffer from poor oral health and a lack of access to oral health care. In his 2000 report *Oral Health in America*, the Surgeon General noted that not only is dental caries the most common chronic disease of childhood, but that low-income children suffer twice as much from dental caries as children who are more affluent. Current statistics indicate that 28 percent of all preschoolers between the ages of 2 and 5 suffer from tooth decay, but in Head Start programs, decay rates often range from 30-40 percent of 3-year-olds and 50-60 percent of 4-year-olds. Head Start directors, program specialists, staff and parents have reported that access to oral health services is the number one health issue affecting Head Start programs nationwide.

The Deamonte Driver tragedy clearly illustrates the difficulty many of these children have in accessing ongoing basic dental care. Reasons for this lack of access are varied and include issues such as parent's lack of knowledge about oral health care and limited numbers of dentists to serve these children. Dental care for children in Head Start generally is covered by Medicaid, however dentists' dissatisfaction with Medicaid programs often result in low levels of dentist participation and limited access to comprehensive dental care for Head Start children.

To offer a solution to this problem, the AAPD is partnering with the Office of Head Start (OHS) to provide dental homes to young children who may otherwise go without care. The OHS has awarded a five-year, \$10 million contract to AAPD to help establish dental homes for approximately one million children across America. As AAPD President Keith R. Morley states, "This contract will open the door to dental homes across the country so that Head Start children can truly receive a healthy start in life."

The contract represents a mutually beneficial partnership which will ultimately improve oral health care for all children enrolled in Head Start programs across the United States. Morley speaks to the desire of Pediatric Dentists to insure good oral health for all children when he says, "It is every pediatric dentist's hope to help alleviate unnecessary discomfort and bring a healthy smile to each and every child. No child should have to learn to live in pain."

Head Start is a national program that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to enrolled children, birth to 5 years of age, and families. The OHS provides grants to local public and private non-profit and for-profit agencies to provide comprehensive child development services to economically disadvantaged children and families. In addition to providing educational services, Head Start grantees also provide parent education and case management services. Services for parents and caregivers enable them to provide safe and nurturing environments for their children which support the child's physical, social-emotional and intellectual development. Case management services can assist parents in obtaining medical and dental care for their enrolled children.

The OHS requires grantees to document that 100 percent of enrolled children are linked with a Dental Home. Each child should be linked with a source of comprehensive, continuously accessible, coordinated and family-centered oral health care provided by a licensed

dentist. Each child should receive a screening exam by the age of 1 as well as linkage to a definitive diagnoses, restorative and rehabilitative treatment. The Dental Home will also incorporate an individualized preventive dental health program based upon a caries-risk assessment and a periodontal disease risk assessment as well as anticipatory guidance about growth and development issues (i.e., teething, digit or pacifier habits). This is consistent with the AAPD Policy on Dental Home.

This initiative will allow for Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) children to access oral health care through the development of a national network of pediatric dentists and general dentists to:

- provide quality dental homes for HS and EHS children;
- train teams of dentists and Head Start personnel in optimal oral health care practices; and
- assist Head Start programs in obtaining comprehensive services to meet the full range of Head Start children's oral health needs.

The AAPD-OHS collaboration also will help provide parents, caregivers and Head Start staff with the latest evidence-based information on how they can help prevent tooth decay and establish a foundation for a lifetime of oral health.

According to AAPD Head Start Project Director and Child Advocate James J. Crall, "This is a huge step towards overcoming a problem that has plagued Head Start programs across the country. Pediatric dentists and our professional colleagues are eager to offer their services, knowledge and commitment to help address the epidemic of childhood dental disease that continues to affect millions of American children." The public-private partnership between AAPD and OHS will directly impact approximately a million children at risk for early childhood caries. The educational component for HS/EHS staff and parents will provide oral health benefit for millions.

The national network of pediatric and general dentists will be organized as an integrated system of regional consultants (one per HS Region), national consultants, state leaders and local champions. A Head Start Leadership Team will be established for each state. The team will be composed of dentists (State Leaders), Head Start staff and representatives from other child-serving organizations. The Leadership team will provide technical assistance, training and support to local Head Start Dental Home networks. For more information about how you can become involved in this important initiative, please visit Web site at [www.aapd.org](http://www.aapd.org) or return the reply card found in this issue.