

HEAD START & ORAL HEALTH

Head Start is the premier provider of developmental and educational services to preschoolers and their families who live in poverty and struggle to meet the basic needs of life. The founders of Head Start understood that learning is not purely a cognitive exercise--children cannot learn when they are hungry, or sick, or too worried about their home situation to concentrate in school. Thus, the program emphasizes not only children's cognitive development but also their social, emotional, and physical development, while maintaining a very strong parent involvement component.

Early Head Start

Early Head Start serves pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. Research clearly demonstrates that to have a positive impact on the lives of children, we must start early; that the first three years of life are critical in children's brain development; and that their brain development is far more susceptible to adverse influences and responsive to positive experiences than has been realized.

Oral Health Data

Tracking data on health indicators is essential to understanding the impact health can have on a child's ability to thrive. The Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) provides the most consistent and comprehensive data on Early

Head Start and Head Start program services, including oral health. All Head Start programs are required to submit PIR data each year to the Office of Head Start.

When looking at PIR oral health data trends over the past few years in Kansas, it is apparent that we still have much work to do. The bad news first: There are fewer Head Start children in Kansas who are receiving a dental exam and more children needing treatment than when we look at the national averages. With the adoption of managed care by our state Medicaid program (KanCare), we have seen the percentage of children receiving exams drop more dramatically. Kansas has multiple managed care organizations involved in the new system which makes it difficult to access the actual number of unduplicated providers, but empirical data suggests that the provider network has shrunk substantially. This means there are fewer dental providers accepting KanCare, which is the most common dental insurance for children enrolled in Head Start. This is most likely due to an

More than 40,000 children under the age of five are living in poverty in Kansas. As financial inequality increases, more families are unable to overcome the risk factors that perpetuate multi-generational poverty.

increase in the administrative burden on dental offices billing KanCare, and a 4% reduction in the KanCare reimbursement rates that occurred in 2016. This rate cut added to the problem of KanCare dental rates not being increased in over 15 years.

The better news is that while the percent of children needing treatment is still larger than the national average, we are making consistent progress on keeping our kids cavity free. In addition, more Head Start children are receiving preventive services, largely due to dental safety net clinics

continuing to build their outreach using public health (ECP) hygienists providing preventive services in community based settings such as health departments and Head Start classrooms.

As this oral health data book goes to press, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment has released the findings on the Kansas Head Start Smiles for Life. This is the first survey of its kind in Kansas that takes an in-depth look at

the oral health status of a representative sample of Head Start children throughout the state. Key findings and the complete report can be found at <https://www.ksheadstart.org>

Barriers to Dental Care

The Kansas Head Start Association conducted surveys of Head Start Health Managers, whose role is to oversee the health of children enrolled in Head Start and ensure that all National Performance Standards related to health are met. The findings consistently revealed two main reasons for failure to receive appropriate dental services: 1) Finding dental providers who will see the children and 2) Lack of follow through on the part of families. Parents often find themselves discouraged and exhausted from barriers they encounter when seeking dental care for their children. These might include searching for providers in their area that accept KanCare insurance, arranging an appointment to minimize lost work hours, and finding reliable transportation. Head Start staff work very hard to help support families in overcoming these barriers and understanding why healthy teeth are an important part of their child's development.

The Kansas Head Start Association is committed to helping families raise cavity free kids. Continued education of children and families

along with a renewed commitment to a robust oral health system that addresses disparities is

key to helping kids stay cavity free...and ready to learn. ■

