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 bad experiences than has been realized.

Oral Health Data
Tracking what 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 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 problems 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 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 whose children receive treatment tend to find themselves discouraged and exhausted from barriers they encounter when seeking dental care: 1) Finding dental providers that accept KanCare insurance, arranging an appointment to minimize lost work hours, and finding reliable transportation. Head Start staff work very hard to help families in overcoming these barriers and understanding why healthy teeth are an important part of their children’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 really to learn.