Head Start Oral Health Program
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Abstract

Head Start in Eastern North Carolina represents a population with critical needs due to socioeconomic and other challenges. This project used school-based preventive education found in previously validated curricula to reinforce proper nutrition and brushing techniques. The partnering Head Start programs (6 centers across Beaufort, Martin and Pitt counties) participated in classroom lessons and parent night presentations to increase oral health literacy. The project was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic and while impact was unable to be assessed, virtual lesson plans and materials were made accessible to parents and children through the Head Start Center websites.

Methods

Impact was assessed through use of the WHO Oral Health Questionnaire for Children and self-reported tooth brushing logs. Initial surveys were distributed at the Head Start annual mandatory Health to assess preliminary knowledge of nutrition and oral health. At Head Start Parent Meetings, parents were given notebooks to take home to self-report and log brushing and flossing habits and the 2nd survey was distributed. The final survey was distributed at the end of the project to assess the overall increase in literacy.

Discussion

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interpretation of findings is limited. Initial surveys revealed a deficiency in oral hygiene, and further studies would confirm that brushing habits to improve. Numerous studies have indicated that improving access to care, while important, is not sufficient to improve the oral health of minority populations. Hence, a need exists to promote and implement community-based educational programs. Through proper guidance, parents and teachers can play a pivotal role in teaching children the importance of good oral health. Through a combined provision of information, it is possible to secure the general health and well-being of future generations.

Results

Initial surveys from two centers (N=20) revealed that 60% of parents reported brushing their child’s 1/day or less. 65% of respondents give their child sugary drinks and snacks at least once a week and 35% report giving their child sugary drinks and snacks at 3 times a week or more. In the past 12 months, 70% of children visited the dentist 2 times or more, 20% visited once, and 10% did not visit the dentist.

Conclusions

Through an oral health and nutrition literacy initiative, lesson plans were created to teach young children the importance of taking care of their teeth. While we were unable to verify the impact due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was modified to emphasize maintaining oral health at home. Over the period of quarantine, new, recorded lesson plans were distributed to parents and children via the Head Start Center websites. Each of the 6 Head Start facilities will receive a dental puppet to continue oral health education via guided lesson plans.

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www.schweitzerfellowship.org

References