



Using values-based messaging to promote oral health

A guide for early childhood educators



dental health
services victoria
oral health for better health

Introduction

Early childhood educators know that children play, grow, and learn best when they are healthy. Poor oral health in childhood can negatively impact speech, growth, confidence, and overall health. Unfortunately, dental conditions are the highest cause of preventable hospital admissions for children between 0-9 years of age ¹. There are many things our community can do to support better oral health in children. This includes ensuring children have easy access to tap water, nutritious food, regular tooth brushing, and visits to the dentist. Early childhood educators can help support the oral health of children and families by promoting these in their daily routines.

Values-based messaging can be an effective tool to help early childhood educators to promote oral health. Values-based messaging is a community engagement strategy that focuses on appealing to people's core values to motivate action. The approach connects with people on a deeper emotional level to persuade, rather than simply providing facts or information about the topic in question.

This guide has been developed to support early childhood educators to better understand values-based messaging and use this in their actions and words. It provides practical examples of how educators can integrate values-based messaging into their daily practice (putting into action) and reframe messages commonly used in written form such as newsletters, policies, message boards and social media or verbally such as learning experiences, orientation sessions, and presentations (putting into words).

The guide is structured around the four top tips for applying values-based messaging, developed by Common Cause Australia:

- Externalise the problem,
- Use values to persuade,
- Focus on the healthy habits you want to see
- Create something good.

Each top tip includes ideas for promoting oral health in early childhood services based on Dental Health Services Victoria's (DHSV) key messages of Drink well, Eat well, Clean well.

This guide was created in response to early childhood educators seeking advice on how to effectively communicate with individual families about children's lunchboxes, specifically the drinks and foods provided. Although well-meaning, such discussions are not typically the role of educators and can trigger feelings of shame, defensiveness, or resistance from families. Taking a whole of service approach is far more effective and suitable for early childhood educators seeking to support the oral health of children and their families. Early childhood educators can use this guide to provide a whole of service approach to promoting oral health.

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In the spirit of reconciliation, DHSV acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay respect to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. DHSV recognises that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, health is a holistic concept that includes physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing, for both the individual and the community. DHSV acknowledges the value of this perspective in our work to improve the oral health of children and families across Victoria.



Externalise the problem

Externalising the problem means recognising the external barriers that children and families experience in attaining good oral health. Choices made by families about their oral health are largely dictated by their environment, including the media, marketing, food availability, and food cost. These external factors affect all of us, providing a common ground for relationship building to address the issue.

Understanding this can help early childhood educators shift the focus away from the individual choices of families. For example, rather than focusing on individual families who place processed foods in children's lunchboxes, early childhood educators can highlight how the food industry undermines families' efforts to provide healthy options for their children by using deceptive marketing tactics to promote foods as healthy, despite containing significant amounts of added sugar. This shifts the focus from families to the role of the processed food industry in creating barriers to health.



“ Shift blame away from families' choices and instead focus on **external barriers we all face** when trying to improve our health and wellbeing.”

Putting it into action

Drink well



It can be challenging to promote drinking tap water when children and families are bombarded with misleading information from sugary drink manufacturers. To increase children's water intake, make tap water available to children throughout the day. Consider partnering with the local water authority to provide water incursions or distribute water bottles for children to use at the service.

Eat well



External factors, such as food availability and misleading marketing, can impact families' efforts to provide nutritious foods. Allow children to eat what has been provided without comment or removal of the items. Utilise message boards, communication apps, and newsletters to share information that exposes the tactics of the food industry. Additionally, provide support to families by providing information on nutritious food for children. Keep messages broad so they are relevant to all families and avoid messages that shame individual choices.

Clean well



For some families it can be difficult to access dental care because of barriers such as transportation, location, opening hours of dental clinics and perceived high costs and long waiting times. Provide information to families on how and where they can access dental services. Consider inviting the local public dental service to deliver an oral health education session.

Putting it into words

Instead of saying...

Try...

Our service asks families not to pack juice or soft drinks for their children.

Manufacturers spend a lot of money on visual marketing, to make sugary drinks appealing. Children will happily drink tap water, given the chance.

Families pack unhealthy snacks in their children's lunchboxes, rather than providing fruit and vegetables.

Food companies heavily promote packaged unhealthy snacks for lunchboxes through deceptive marketing. In season fruits and vegetables are better options and usually better value too.

Families often provide processed snacks in children's lunchboxes, which impact their focus and energy levels.

Unhealthy products marketed to children by the food industry are often full of salt, sugar, and fat to preserve shelf life. These products have a negative impact on children's focus and energy level throughout the day.

A lot of families find it hard to pack a healthy lunch for their children.

Influencers and the media have created unrealistic expectations about healthy lunchboxes, making them seem complicated. But creating healthy lunchboxes can be as easy as adding a fruit or vegetable.

2 Use values (not facts) to persuade

Simply presenting facts is not enough to change people's behaviour. Instead, the most impactful messages for promoting health are those that align with people's values. While facts and statistics can help in understanding an issue, appealing to shared values can be a much more powerful motivator. These values may include fairness, equality, compassion, empathy, and social justice.

For instance, displaying a statistic like “over 40% of children suffer from tooth decay in their baby teeth” in the service entrance is unlikely to motivate families to visit the dentist. Instead, emphasising the idea that every child deserves access to dental health services appeals to values like fairness and social equality, which might encourage families to seek dental care and guidance.

“ Changing the way families think about health has more to do with **tapping into their personal values** than it does with facts and figures.”



Putting it into action

Drink well



Tap water is the healthiest drink option, but children might not realise its benefits. Storybooks convey messages that resonate with children and can encourage them to adopt positive behaviours. Reading books about water to children and encouraging families to read them at home can help promote the importance of drinking tap water for their health.

Eat well



Early childhood educators want all children to feel included and aim to provide inclusive learning environments. Providing learning experiences that highlight a variety of delicious healthy foods from diverse cultures can help make the learning experience relevant to all children. Invite families to contribute to a 'lunchbox ideas' booklet that shares different ideas for nutritious lunchbox snacks. Use words and pictures to make it accessible to all families.

Clean well



Children want to be able to play and explore. Early childhood educators can provide learning activities that teach children about the connection between healthy teeth and wellbeing for play and exploration. Use pictures and colouring-in sheets of animals to trigger discussion. Many zoo animals need regular brushing to keep their teeth strong. Talk about how strong teeth allow them to eat a wide variety of food, giving them lots of energy to play.

Putting it into words

Instead of saying...

Try...

Children should drink 1.2 litres of water per day. ²

Water keeps children hydrated and helps fuel their minds and bodies, so they can learn and play.

Only 8.5% of children in Australia are eating the recommended daily serves of fruit and vegetables. ³

All children should have the opportunity to access and try a broad range of delicious nourishing foods.

1 in 4 Australian children have at least one baby tooth with decay. ⁴

Looking after children's teeth now sets them up for better health in adulthood.

More than 2 in 5 Australian children experience dental caries in their primary teeth. ⁵

All Australian children should have access to regular professional dental check-ups.



Focus on the healthy habits you want to see

To effectively engage people with health messages, it is important to focus on what we want people to believe, rather than what we wish they didn't. Sugary drink manufacturers often emphasise the appeal of their products rather than their negative effects. In their story, sugary drinks are typically associated with fun, friendship, and love. We can take a leaf out of their book and, when promoting oral health, make the story about the benefits of tap water, nutritious foods and oral hygiene.

Early childhood educators can implement this approach by promoting the many health benefits of tap water, nutritious food, and oral hygiene in their daily activities with children and communications with families. Whole of service initiatives, like a healthy eating and oral health policy, can further reinforce the story as it communicates the 'why'. It is much more impactful for educators to tell their story, than attempt to bust the myths cultivated by sugary drink and food manufacturers. Focussing on their products and repeating their claims (even to say how wrong they are) only serves to build these associations in the minds of children and families.



Putting it into action

Drink well



Implement a healthy eating and oral health policy to communicate with families that the service supports children to drink tap water throughout the day. Focus the policy on the benefits of tap water. Create interest by adding cucumber slices or mint to clear jugs of tap water for children to access and drink. Make the water station fun and appealing by using pictures of water in different forms and children playing.

Eat well



Provide learning experiences that allow children to explore foods with their senses and learn about a variety of different foods. There is no need to talk about unhealthy foods, focus instead on the inclusion of nutritious, colourful and delicious foods. Provide a bowl of fresh fruit and vegetables in the classroom for children to consume when hungry. Slinky apple machines are a fun way to encourage the eating of apples (pro tip: remove the setting that peels the apples).

Clean well



Avoid talking about how the dentist can be scary, instead promote the local public dental service and the great ways they can look after children's oral health. Coordinate a dental service incursion, where children learn about caring for their teeth. Host an event for families to meet local dental professionals.

Putting it into words

Instead of saying...

Try...

If a lunchbox includes junk food, our service makes sure children eat their healthy snacks first.

In our service we want children to enjoy a variety of delicious, nutritious foods of different colours, textures and flavours.

Sugary drinks are bad for children's teeth.

Tap water and milk are the best drinks to help our teeth and bones stay healthy and strong.

It is hard to get children to brush their teeth, but they should do it twice per day.

Brushing teeth twice a day helps keep children's teeth stay strong – make it more fun by brushing along to a favourite song or using a brushing chart.

Many families don't understand the importance of baby teeth.

Many families have never been informed about the importance of baby teeth and their role in maintaining space for future adult teeth. Healthy baby teeth also play an important role in allowing children to speak clearly and try a wide variety of food.



Create something good

As a rule, people are more receptive to positive solutions and the opportunity to create something good, rather than constantly battling against something bad. When encouraging people to adopt new behaviours, including those that support their oral health, it is more effective to emphasise the positives, rather than trying to eliminate negative ones. Creating something good is more likely to encourage children and families to embrace change.

For early childhood educators wanting to promote oral health, the service environment provides a great opportunity to create something good. For example, installing a water fountain at the service entrance for children and families to access at drop off and pick up would be an easy way to encourage the consumption of water. This approach has a greater chance of influencing behaviour than highlighting the negative impact of sugary drinks through an entrance display.



Putting it into action

Drink well



Encourage children to think about how water helps all living things thrive. Share examples of these learnings with families either through message boards or the service newsletter. Promote National Water Week, which is celebrated in October every year, and encourage children and families to participate in service- led activities.

Eat well



Services can also implement learning activities that promote fun and positive food exploration, such as kitchen gardens for harvesting herbs, fruits, and vegetables, which can be used in age-appropriate cooking or food preparation activities. Invite families with fruit trees or vegetable gardens to share spare produce.

Clean well



Display posters that promote oral health, like the Deadly Tooth Tips posters that promote the key messages of Drink well, Eat well, Clean well. These posters can be displayed at the service entrance to engage families as well as children.

Putting it into words

Instead of saying...

Our service does not allow children to bring sugary drinks or juices.

Our healthy eating and oral health policy does not allow birthday cakes or junk food.

We discourage sugary foods, as they are bad for children's health and development.

Children will develop tooth decay if they don't brush their teeth twice a day.

Try...

Our service has a 100% water commitment, so the children are hydrated and have more energy throughout the day.

Our service has a healthy eating and oral health policy to provide children the opportunity to experience a variety of foods. Our celebrations, fundraisers, and events promote healthy, diverse, and culturally significant food options.

Our service promotes a variety of nutritious foods so children have long-lasting energy to learn and play.

Brushing teeth twice a day keeps teeth strong and healthy.

Resources to help put Values-Based Messaging into practice

Family engagement

[Oral health newsletter inserts for early childhood services](#)

[Deadly Tooth Tips – social media toolkit](#)

[Deadly Tooth Tips – series of 3 posters](#)

[Keeping Teeth Healthy 0 – 5 years](#)

[Keeping Teeth Healthy – social media kit](#)

[Translated oral health information](#)

[Top 10 oral health tips for preschool children](#)

Learning experiences

[Suggested oral health story books](#)

[Early Childhood Resource Hub](#)

[Healthy Eating Advisory Service – Healthy curriculum activities](#)

Healthy eating and oral health policy

[Healthy Eating Advisory Service – Healthy eating and oral health policy checklist](#)

Community engagement

[Healthy Eating and Oral Health in Victorian Early Childhood Services – Infographic](#)



Endnotes

- 1 Victorian Government Department of Health - [Child oral health](#) | [health.vic.gov.au](#)
- 2 Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care - [Water](#) | [Eat For Health](#)
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics - [Dietary behaviour, 2020-21 financial year](#) | [Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)
- 4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - [Oral health and dental care in Australia, Healthy teeth](#) - [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)
- 5 AIHW - [Australia's children, Dental health](#) - [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)