Healthy Tums, Healthy Gums: nutrition and oral health collaboration supporting vulnerable families

Lisa Fitzgerald¹, Jodie Peace²
¹Oral Health, Hunter New England LHD, ²Community Health Dietetics, Hunter New England LHD

Nutrition and oral health share a co-dependent relationship. It is estimated that 50% of children aged 5 to 6 years have experienced some form of tooth decay, which is 70% more common in vulnerable groups. The Intensive Family Preservation Program (IFPP) is an initiative of NSW Government Family and Community Services that seeks to support vulnerable families at imminent risk of having their children placed in out-of-home care. In Tamworth NSW, case workers within the IFPP identified poor oral health and nutrition as prevalent preventable health risk for program children. This resulted in a partnership between Oral Health and Tamworth Dietetic Services to investigate appropriate collaborative support strategies for this demographic. Semi-structured interview protocols were conducted with key stakeholders, including IFPP families, to identify nutrition and oral health education and the learning needs. Consultations confirmed key education areas in childhood nutrition and dental hygiene. Subsequently a five session oral health dietetic education program ‘Healthy Tums, Healthy Gums’, with pictorial resources was developed. Lower health literacy resources were a reoccurring theme in interviews, with IFPP families identified as having a third-grade literacy level. Due to the lower literacy needs of the group, the program employed education methods to facilitate empowering families, including:

- how to versus why
- the teach-back or show-me approach
- demonstrations
- key messages
- limited syllable words
- pictures and illustrations
- utilisation of practical strategies to convey messages.

The initial pilot has been completed. Results indicate that collaborative messages had the greatest impact on improving knowledge. Baseline results indicate that prior to education participants lacked knowledge of the practical links between nutrition and oral health, and childhood management strategies that significantly improved post-education, e.g. integrated relationship between juice, decay and fussy eating; and how to encourage water consumption. Sustainable partnerships have been formed with the IFPP to deliver the program three times per year to each new cycle. The collaborative program helps build capacity for individuals, as well as all associated organisations, by ensuring appropriate consistent and current information is disseminated to the community. The program supports partnership building between dietetic and oral health services, which in turn strengthens the delivery of coexisting preventative nutrition and dental health messages. While initially providing the opportunity to explore the education and learning needs of
vulnerable families on these topics, success has allowed a current project to evolve that is exploring the potential applicability of program information for supporting the broader rural community setting.