Dear Friends,

We are excited to share our first publication about the Children’s Friend Dental Program and our partnership with Samuels Sinclair Dental Center at Rhode Island Hospital.

Children’s oral health is critically important in their overall health and well-being. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and Centers for Disease Control, oral disease – primarily, cavities – is the number one chronic disease among children in the U.S.¹ The AAP and American Dental Association emphasize the importance of children visiting a dentist in their earliest years, and highlight the effectiveness of school-based dental programs in achieving better oral health for children.²

In keeping with our mission to be an innovative leader in improving the healthy development of Rhode Island’s most vulnerable children, we launched the dental program as it currently exists in 2013. Since then, nearly 2,000 dental exams have been completed with children in our Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

It is so important to acknowledge the incredible collaborations and relationships that have helped this program achieve the success it has achieved. The Samuels Sinclair Dental Center has been an extraordinary partner, and we are so grateful to the Center’s Director, Dr. Elizabeth Benz, for her leadership and the commitment of her team in ensuring the children and families we serve gain access to dental services as well as education about their oral health.

Our child care partners have embraced the dental program and noted the benefits it has had on their children, families, and staff. We are thankful to our Children’s Friend Board Members who have become champions of children’s oral health – your support has been integral to this program’s success.

In this report, you will read about these great partnerships and hear from those who have been on the ground, working together to improve the oral health of children and families. In the coming year, we expect to build upon this year’s accomplishments, increasing the number of children seen for dental exams and cleanings. We will also be focusing on follow-up visits, our sealant project, and hosting events that promote healthy hygiene to engage children and families in taking ownership of their oral health.

We thank you all so much for your support, and look forward to continuing our work together.

Sincerely,

Aimee Mitchell, MSW, LICSW
Senior Vice President of Programs and Operations
Director of Head Start
Children’s Friend

Mary Cram
Board Member
Children’s Friend

Spotlight on Leadership:

Dr. Elizabeth Benz

For over 85 years, the Samuels Sinclair Dental Center at Rhode Island Hospital has been committed to providing comprehensive dental care to children and to individuals with disabilities. This legacy continues under the leadership of Dr. Elizabeth Benz, who has served as the center’s director since February of 2015.

Dr. Benz is a graduate of the Boston University Goldman School of Dental Medicine and completed her residency at Rhode Island Hospital. She cares deeply about making oral health accessible to under-served children and people with special needs. She joined the team of Samuels Sinclair while the partnership with Children’s Friend was underway, and right away began thinking about what improvements could be made to the program. In addition to increasing program reach in the 2015-2016 year, Dr. Benz was instrumental in the development of the dental sealant pilot project, an innovative initiative implemented in early 2016.

The staff at Samuels Sinclair are passionate about educating children and their families about oral health, a mission which Children’s Friend shares. “Dr. Benz runs a very accountable clinic,” said Maria Chionchio, Manager of the Nurse Family Partnership Program at Children’s Friend. “She and the staff of Samuels Sinclair are very invested in ensuring the children we serve not only gain access to services but are provided with education about how to maintain their oral health. This shared commitment to children and families is what makes this a strong partnership.”

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“The providers really love getting to go out to the different centers and seeing all the kids,” said Dr. Benz about her staff visiting Children’s Friend sites. “A lot of times when we go out to the programs, it is the children’s first interaction with a dentist. Seeing a dentist while they are in their own element, with the teachers and nurses they know, takes some of the anxiety away. When children come into our clinic for follow-up, they see the same friendly faces and families are happy that their child is less anxious. We are glad to have this niche in the pediatric world.”

Innovation in Practice: Dental Sealant Pilot Project

This year Children’s Friend and Samuels Sinclair developed and implemented an innovative pilot project to apply dental sealants on primary (baby) teeth. Dental sealants are coatings that are applied to the chewing surfaces of back teeth. This coating acts as a “seal” to keep out plaque and food, aiding in the prevention of cavities. Although cavities are the most common chronic disease in children, research on applying sealants to primary teeth is limited, and primary sealants are not covered by insurance.

“We were interested in sealants and we met with Dr. Benz and the dentists at Samuels Sinclair – and they agreed to try this as a small project,” said Maria Chionchio, Manager of Nurse Family Partnership Program at Children’s Friend. Dr. George Dupont, Samuels Sinclair Dental Center’s pediatric dentist explained, “This pilot is fairly innovative because research on primary sealants is still limited. [But], with the Children’s Friend population, knowing they are high risk, we figured if we can stop the cavities from happening, that would be a great thing.”

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Although the sealants did wear away on a fair number of children, no child developed cavities after the application of the sealants. According to Dr. Benz and Dr. Dupont, these results are both encouraging and positive. Samuels Sinclair will continue to follow the children who received sealants into next year, in order to have more long-term data on the ultimate impact of the sealant application.

In addition to monitoring the children in the original pilot, next year Children’s Friend and Samuels Sinclair plan to expand the project to the five Pre-K classrooms within Children’s Friend, increasing the number of children screened and the sample size of sealant recipients. A long-term goal of the project is to screen all Children’s Friend students for sealants. Children’s Friend and Samuels Sinclair are looking forward to contributing further data to research on pediatric dental practices.

Innovation in Practice: Dental Sealant Pilot Project

Poverty and Oral Health Disparities

Limited access to preventive dental services increases the oral health risk of children living in poverty. Children living in poverty do not visit the dentist as regularly, or as early on in life, as their higher income peers. This disparity in poor oral health adversely impacts these children’s ability to eat, speak, and learn, further cementing social inequities already stacked against this vulnerable population.

Supporting Partners, Supporting Children

Children’s Friend has a long history of developing child care partnerships to improve services for children. At the heart of this work is collaboration, commitment, and trust. Currently, there are 12 licensed child care centers that have partnered with Children’s Friend under the Early Head Start (EHS) – Child Care Partnership.

“Head Start and Early Head Start both have significant performance standards around children's oral health,” said Aimee Mitchell, Children’s Friend Senior Vice President of Programs and Operations and Director of Head Start. “All of our partners have embraced these standards and some have applied them across their programs, not just in their Head Start classrooms.”

At The Children’s Workshop (TCW), a Children’s Friend partner site, this approach is working. Kelli DiDomenico, Vice President of Family Engagement at The Children’s Workshop, describes the impact of the partnership as a tree growing branches: “When we opened our first Head Start classroom, we didn’t realize how many branches would expand to other classrooms and facilities, just from seeing the quality in that one program. Now, we have adopted many of the Head Start guidelines into TCW.” For example, the program now asks all families to provide information about their child’s dental care, and will work with families to help them find a dentist if they do not have a current dental home, meaning a primary pediatric dentist.

Many low-income children, a primary demographic served by Children’s Friend and TCW, do not have any interaction with a dental provider until they enter school. “Our work with Children’s Friend has really opened up a new world to families and helps them to understand the value of dental health,” said Kelli. In addition, Kelli shared that the program has had lasting impacts on TCW staff and educators. “Now, practicing good dental habits is part of the natural routine in the classroom. Our staff have become educated about oral health and they are able to educate the families, who are often their peers – this is critical.”

The success of the partnership lies in the collaboration among partners to break down barriers to accessing dental care, such as providing children with toothbrushes and connecting families to a dental home. One of the most important aspects for families, noted Kelli, is having the dental providers visiting the centers. “This is huge for working families, who might not be able to bring their child to the dentist's office during its normal hours.”

“What has been really valuable is the support that Children’s Friend provides. One of our children had a lot of decay in her mouth, and with the knowledge and support from Children’s Friend and our own educators, we were able to work with the family to change their habits and get the child treatment. Without that support, that three-year-old might not have received any treatment until she went to school. The support that is provided to the partners and families in real time is very beneficial – and the best thing about the partnership is that this is a true collaboration,” said Kelli.
A Day of Smiles: A Success Story

When Children's Friend Board Member Mark Griffin, Senior Vice President of Human Resources at CVS Health, learned about the agency's dental program, he wondered how he could help support the initiative.

“Hearing about dental health, the importance of prevention in young children, and the fact that oral health is part of overall health – I really thought the program was worthwhile and would fit within the mission of CVS Health and our social responsibility initiatives.”

Mark approached CVS Health Corporate Relations and gave them information about the dental health program and its impact. “We decided to purchase dental health supplies from our own inventory to donate to the Children's Friend population,” Mark shared, “so that children would get their own materials [that] they could get excited about.”

The Day of Smiles event, held at the Berkshire Street Center, engaged children in Head Start and Early Head Start with access to dental exams, a tooth fairy friend, and dental-themed art projects. The event was a success with over 150 children engaged in learning about dental health and receiving exams. “This event was a lot of fun,” shared Sarah King, a Teacher Assistant at Berkshire, who dressed up as the tooth fairy. “The kids loved it, the employees loved it, the parents loved it. The kids learned a lot because the activities were hands-on and visual, and that really instilled in them a higher level of learning about oral hygiene.”

Each child who participated received a gift bag containing dental supplies such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, and floss donated by CVS Health. Infant toothbrushes were provided to EHS children.

“The goal of distributing these items in the gift bags was to give each child something they could take home and use, to keep them engaged and excited about their oral health,” said Mark. “Many families served by Children's Friend might not be able to afford these dental hygiene products, so to be able to give them something of their own, was important.”

Sarah believes the event was a success because it fostered a deeper understanding of the importance of oral hygiene. “The Day of Smiles was fantastic, and I think the long-term goals that were achieved because of it were more than we expected. Children have gone home to tell their parents they were excited to see the dentist, and parents seem more inclined to make sure their child goes to the dentist because the children are talking about it.” She added that the children loved receiving the gift bags, which also included a laminated tooth brushing schedule that children and parents could follow at home.

Children’s Friend thanks CVS Health for their generous donation and involvement in the dental program. Their support was integral to the success of this year’s Day of Smiles event. Children's Friend looks forward to engaging more children through similar events in the coming year!
Key Accomplishments: Ensuring the Best for Children

This past year, Children's Friend worked with Samuels Sinclair staff to increase the number of children participating in on-site dental examinations. “We made a lot of changes in the dynamics around the day that the dentists visit,” explained Maria Chionchio of Children's Friend. “For example, we changed the dental exam consent form to be more family-friendly and we started issuing dental reminder cards to families the day before the visit.” Children's Friend and Samuels Sinclair also developed a comprehensive exam calendar and partnered Children's Friend nurses with dentists on the day of the exam visits. With these efforts, the number of children receiving dental exams increased significantly from years one and two. In total, 802 children saw the dentist this program year.

In addition to increasing the number of children receiving exams, Children's Friend and Samuels Sinclair coordinated to increase the number of children receiving cleanings after their initial screening. “We wanted to boost the number of children being seen twice, and we did really well with that this year,” said Dr. Benz, noting the cleaning visit is an additional, important opportunity to identify children in need of follow-up care. “When children come in for the cleaning, they have another set of eyes on their oral health.” A total of 686 children saw the hygienist for a cleaning along with fluoride treatment.

In the coming program year, Children's Friend and Samuels Sinclair will continue to work together to ensure all children who are in need of a follow-up visit to treat more significant oral health issues, such as decay, make an appointment and receive treatment. “The goal is on follow-up care,” said Dr. Benz, emphasizing this is necessary to ensure children do not go untreated. This past year, eight children in need completed a follow-up appointment with a dentist. No children required emergency treatment.

After encouraging results from the sealant pilot project, Children's Friend and Samuels Sinclair are looking forward to expanding the project to Children's Friend Pre-K classrooms. This will increase the number of children potentially eligible to receive sealants to 90. The pilot project involved sealing teeth on 11 children, and Samuels Sinclair will continue to follow these children after their graduation from Children's Friend to monitor the effectiveness of the sealants.

Children's Friend continues to emphasize the importance of dental homes to families. Children's Friend receives and maintains proof of exams for children with private dentists. Children who do not have a private dentist are seen by Samuels Sinclair. Once a child engages in on-site services, Samuels Sinclair Dental Center becomes their dental home.

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