



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Delta Dental and National Head Start Association Launch Partnership to Improve Preschoolers' Oral Health**

OAK BROOK, IL (August 6, 2007) -- Delta Dental Plans Association and the National Head Start Association have joined together to fight a growing epidemic of poor oral health among some of our nation's youngest citizens. Their alliance will provide the national Head Start organization with additional tools and resources to improve the oral health status of children in the Head Start program, including oral health education and, in various parts of the country, screening and preventive care.

“With the right tools, cavities and other oral health problems are almost entirely preventable, yet millions of children continue suffering needlessly from the physical and social burdens of poor oral health,” said Kim Volk, president and CEO of Delta Dental Plans Association. “The National Head Start Association already understands the value of oral health and together we can reach large numbers of children at a critical time in their development.”

Dental caries (tooth decay) is the single most common chronic childhood disease in the United States.<sup>1</sup> According to a recent report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the trend appears to be worsening among preschool aged children. The figures, which compared National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data from 1988-1994 and 1999-2004, showed that tooth decay in primary (baby) teeth increased from 24 to 28 percent in children aged 2 to 5 years. These numbers are particularly significant considering that cavity rates among older children improved during this same time period and have experienced significant improvements over the past few decades.

Even before permanent teeth emerge, oral health is important to the overall health and well-being of young children. Keeping baby teeth healthy helps set the stage for a lifetime of oral health by promoting the proper hygiene habits, spacing and healthy gums needed to support permanent teeth. At any age, chronic dental pain resulting from conditions such as cavities, gingival disease, malocclusion (poor bite) and oral trauma, can contribute to a range of physical, developmental and social issues. Children with poor oral health can sometimes experience impaired speech development, nutritional deficiencies, reduced self-esteem, and absences from and an inability to concentrate in school.<sup>ii</sup> In fact, more than 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental-related illnesses.

The CDC report also showed disparities in the oral health status of children based on race, ethnicity and income. For children ages 6 to 11 from families with incomes below the federal poverty line, 12 percent had untreated tooth decay compared with 4 percent of children from families living above the poverty line. Among Mexican-American children in that same age group, 31 percent had decay in their permanent teeth as compared with 19 percent of non-Hispanic white children.

Created in the mid-1960s, Head Start is regarded as the most successful, longest-running national school readiness program in the United States. In addition to providing comprehensive education to low-income children, they are also charged with offering health and nutrition services. Nearly 25 million pre-school children have benefited from Head Start.

“Our educators have seen firsthand how oral health issues can impact a child’s ability to learn, concentrate and interact with others -- all critical parts of early childhood development,” said Sarah Green, president and CEO of National Head Start Association. “This partnership brings together two organizations that value children’s oral health and feel a responsibility to make a real difference. We value Delta Dental’s contributions to our program in various parts of the country over the years, and are excited about bringing their oral health knowledge and expertise to more children and families.”

#### *About the National Head Start Association*

The National Head Start Association (<http://www.nhsa.org>) is a private not-for-profit membership organization dedicated exclusively to meeting the needs of Head Start children and their families. It represents more than 1 million children, 200,000 staff and 2,600 Head Start programs in the United States. The Association provides support for the entire Head Start community by advocating for policies that strengthen services to Head Start children and their families; by providing extensive training and professional development to Head Start staff; and by developing and disseminating research, information, and resources that enrich Head Start program delivery. You also can find more information at <http://www.SaveHeadStart.org>.

*About Delta Dental Plans Association*

Delta Dental Plans Association ([www.deltadental.com](http://www.deltadental.com)) based in Oak Brook, IL, is a national network of independent not-for-profit dental service corporations specializing in providing dental benefits programs to 50 million Americans in more than 88,000 employee groups throughout the country.

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<sup>i</sup> Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> Oral Health & Learning - When Children's Health Suffers, So Does Their Ability to Learn (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) 2003 by National Maternal & Child Oral Health Resource Center.