

ZOOM IN with a Registered Dental Hygienist

Teledentistry - Dignity Health, First Teeth First

February is Children's Dental Health month so it is fitting for me to tell you about our children's oral health program. The First Teeth First Program is a community based program providing services to children 0-5 years of age and expectant mothers at no charge. Services provided include an oral screening, anticipatory guidance, goal setting, and referral and care coordination, provided by a registered dental hygienist and promotora. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the program operated in person at WIC clinics (Women, Infant, and Children), pediatrician's offices, OBGYN offices and childcares.

In March 2020, when Arizona declared a public health emergency, the First Teeth First program was unable to provide oral health services in the community.

However, it became clear there was still a need for oral health consultation and screenings when our partners at the WIC program called to ask for our assistance to guide families with dental health concerns and questions. Our WIC partners had received numerous requests from clients for oral health services during Zoom appointments with their clients. We discovered there was a need for the communication of oral health information through a new medium. Such was the inception of our teledentistry project!

Michelle Gross-Panico, DHSc, RDH, PMP, navigated her way through Dignity Health resources and requirements to create a secure platform using DocuSign and Zoom video conferencing to communicate with mothers of young children and expectant moms. The goal was to provide anticipatory guidance, screening, navigation and set an appointment at a dental home. The service has been up and running since August 2020 and well received by partners and families in the community.

Although the teledentistry model meets the needs and demands for families in the new COVID-19 world we are living in, there are challenges. Two of the most common service delivery obstacles of getting a clear image of teeth are caused by a moving child or poor lighting. By practicing critical thinking skills, using clarifying questions, and patience, we work through each situation. The end result is that we, as oral health professionals, are educating families, understanding their dental needs, and connecting them with a dental office to address their specific needs.

Using teledentistry with the Zoom platform, Karen Felty, RDH, AP, and Natalie Hernandez, BS, CMA, promotora, helped a mother of a baby and a 5 year old son. Mom thought her 5 year old had a cavity. It was discovered that not only did the child have cavities, but also, the mother had an abscessed tooth. Karen was able to provide screenings and oral health instructions for the children, while Natalie investigated the family's dental coverage, located dental offices, and helped set dental appointments the whole family. See the attached picture.

What is teledentistry? It is a change in the oral health care delivery system to our community, giving the ability to connect with our families during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. The First Teeth First teledentistry services are available throughout Maricopa County and services are complementary. It is exciting and rewarding that we can provide a ZOOM in with a dental hygienist!

Laurie Clark RDH, AP, BADH