Integrating Pediatric Oral Health into Advanced Practice Nursing Curricula

Integrating oral health practices into graduate nursing curricula is essential to ensure that advanced practice nurses (i.e., family nurse practitioners and pediatric nurse practitioners) caring for children in primary care settings are competent and confident to perform thorough pediatric oral health assessments and preventive therapeutic oral health services. Dental caries is one of the most chronic preventable conditions among children in the U.S. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Oral health and medical providers are encouraged to promote and implement early prevention strategies to reduce dental caries risk among pediatric patients. Nurse practitioners who provide care in pediatric primary settings often have first and subsequent encounters with pediatric patients and are their sole providers. As a result, nurse practitioners should provide preventive services, such as oral health assessments, fluoride varnish treatments, and referrals for appropriate dental care.

Activity

Faculty members collaboratively developed pediatric educational content for Family and Pediatric Nurse Practitioner students enrolled in a graduate pediatric primary care course delivered online. Content for the educational module was adapted from American Academy of Pediatrics, “Protecting All Children’s Teeth” (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.). After completing the modules, students obtained an overview of pediatric oral growth and development and the dental caries process. Additionally, students received content and recommended timetables on performing oral health assessments per the American Academy of Pediatrics. To demonstrate the ease of fluoride varnish application on children between ages 1 and 3, a video was embedded into the module. At the end of each module, students received a mini quiz to complete prior to advancing to the next section to self-assess knowledge gained. All students completed an adapted, validated 16-item, 5-point Likert type scale survey “Pediatric Oral Health Practices” 2 weeks before and after, following the delivery of content. Additionally, as part of the Pediatric Nurse Practitioner curriculum requirement, students received 60 minutes of hands-on simulated training in fluoride varnish application as part of their simulated clinical practicum experience.

Student Reactions

Prior to receiving the pediatric oral health content, students reported “not knowing” the bacteria transmission from mother to child during saliva inoculation through sharing of utensils, kissing, or cleansing of pacifier a child’s dental caries risk. Further, majority of the students were not comfortable with performing oral health practices, such as examining children’s teeth for decay and advising parents on proper at-home oral hygiene practices for children. After receiving the pediatric oral health content, students’ knowledge and comfort level improved. Additionally, students synthesized the value and need for incorporating oral health practices into future well-child visits.

A student commented:

I think this would be a great asset and could make a huge difference in the oral health of our children. It is so important, and the reasoning goes beyond the obvious, and it also becomes a self-esteem issue in later years. I am definitely willing to incorporate this into a well-child exam!

Another student expressed, “As I progress through my program, I see the importance of this topic.” These findings highlight the ease and value of incorporating pediatric oral health in graduate nursing curricula. Future interventions will include student-led interprofessional collaborative service-learning activities (dental hygiene and family nurse practitioner and pediatric nurse practitioner) to conduct oral health assessments and fluoride varnish with pediatric patients and caregivers.

References


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