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Development of the California Oral Health Literacy Toolkit

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Although many factors contribute to the high prevalence of oral health problems and widening disparities in the U.S., limited oral health literacy has emerged as a major contributor.¹⁻³ Oral health literacy (OHL) refers to people's abilities to access, understand and use oral health information to inform decisions and actions for themselves and others.^{2,4} It also refers to providers' abilities to communicate clearly, equitably and persuasively with patients and caregivers and to the "patient friendliness" of oral health practice sites. Studies over the past two decades show a strong association between low individual, provider and organizational OHL and the prevalence of oral health problems and inequities.^{2,5,6} Many federal health agencies and national and state dental and public health associations have defined policy goals to improve OHL. For example, the American Dental Association established its National Advisory Committee on Health Literacy in Dentistry. This committee has provided sessions on oral health literacy at the ADA annual sessions and sponsors national oral health literacy surveys about knowledge, opinions and practices among dental practitioners and students.² Additionally, the California Dental Association recommends promoting evidence-based approaches to increase oral health literacy.⁷

Because the public receives most of its oral health information at dental practices, dental providers play a central role in advancing OHL. Research studies now provide important best-practice guidance about ways that dental providers can improve their own OHL and that of their patients. These approaches include assessing the practice setting for "patient friendliness" (easy-to-navigate, shame-free and understandable intake and consent forms and educational materials) and for good provider-patient communication (culturally competent, easy to understand and using "teach-back" check-ins with patients).^{2,5} However, few dental providers have received OHL training in professional settings or through continuing education.^{2,5,8} In addition, although health literacy toolkits and other resources have been developed,⁹ none has been adapted to support dental provider education in a way that works within practice constraints.⁷

Beginning in 2018, the California Department of Public Health, Office of Oral Health engaged with the Health Research for Action Center at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Public Health to create the California Oral Health Literacy Toolkit Project — intended to advance its statewide goal of improving OHL among dental providers.^{7,10,11} In the project's first phase, the project team conducted a review

of the literature about studies related to OHL for dental providers, conducted 50 in-depth interviews with national OHL experts and diverse California dental providers, and performed an environmental scan of available OHL materials and training resources for dental providers. Results showed low rates of dental provider knowledge and adoption of recommended OHL practices and very limited availability of OHL resources for providers.⁷ The interviews with California dental providers similarly showed low rates of OHL knowledge and use of recommended communication practices and demonstrated that providers were very interested in having OHL training and supportive resources. Providers recommended having statewide and local training and a concise, digital, skills-based provider toolkit that explains OHL fundamentals and offers strategies for implementing OHL techniques in dental practices.

Developing the Toolkit

In the project's second phase, the team drew on the initial study findings and available resources to develop an OHL toolkit, using an iterative, participatory process that involved OHL experts, diverse California dental providers and community members. The California Oral Health Literacy Toolkit includes five components to help providers learn or review basic OHL principles, including communicating clearly and with cultural humility and creating a welcoming environment for all patients:

- **Oral Health Literacy in Practice**, a 24-page guidebook that reviews essential principles of OHL and suggests ways to implement OHL at every touchpoint of patient visits.
- **Practice Assessment Checklist**, an easy-to-use first step to assess a dental practice's OHL preparedness.

- **What Is Teach-Back**, an example-based quick reference for learning and practicing how to use teach-back with patients.
- **Health Literacy Action Plan**, a worksheet that dental teams can use to write down health literacy goals as well as identify steps to reach them.
- **Going to the Dentist**, a six-panel brochure that guides patients through the “before, during and after” of dental visits using clear communication principles.

The toolkit is available to [download free of charge](#) from the California Oral Health Technical Assistance Center. As of May 2021, trainings for providers on the toolkit and oral health literacy are being offered through the California Dental Association (offering continuing education credits) and at local dental societies. The project team encourages dental professionals to enroll in a training, download the toolkit components and consider how each might help their dental practice begin or continue adopting OHL principles and approaches. ■

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The Oral Health Literacy Toolkit

The components of The Oral Health Literacy Toolkit have been designed to help you implement oral health literacy in your practice in a way that fits your needs. Peruse these pages and see which of the components work best for you and your practice.

Oral Health Literacy in Practice

This 24-page guidebook to oral health literacy provides a simple road map for assessing your practice and implementing change at your own pace.

- Suggests strategies for communicating clearly and empowering patients.
- Contains example scripts and templates.

[Download and view digitally.](#)



Oral Health Literacy in Practice

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH



Health Literacy Tools

The tools on these pages have been designed and adapted for use in dental settings. They will help your practice determine the what and how of implementing health literacy.



Pre-appointment phone script

This phone script is just one approach to pre-appointment phone calls. You can modify it to suit your practice's needs.

Dental staff:

Hi, is this Ms. James? This is Rebecca from Dr. Monroe's office.

✓ If the answer is yes:

Ms. James, I am calling to talk with you about your upcoming appointment. Do you have a few minutes?

✗ If the answer is no:

That's okay. I am calling to remind you that your appointment is this coming _____. When would be a good time for us to talk for a few minutes before your appointment?

Great. We will call you then. We will only take a few minutes of your time to help you get ready for your visit. Thanks, and talk to you soon.

✓ If the answer is yes:

Excellent. I am calling today to talk about your visit. Since this is your first time seeing us, we want to give you some background information and help you get ready. Does that sound okay?


First, I want to make sure we have the right person. Can you tell me your date of birth?


20


The guidebook contains several tools for implementing health literacy, such as example scripts.

Practice Assessment Checklist

This checklist will help you assess your practice for health literacy. Whether your practice is new to health literacy or looking to improve upon previous work, the results can help you and your team develop a health literacy plan that works for your practice. To make a plan, review the OHL Guidebook and use the HL Action Plan template.

 Preparing for change	Doesn't meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations
1. Oral health literacy team or leader has been selected.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Practice has an oral health literacy action plan.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Staff understands the impact of oral health literacy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Each staff member understands their role in oral health literacy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Each staff member understands their role in the action plan.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Staff has received health literacy training.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

 Creating a health-literate environment	Doesn't meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations
1. Patients can speak to a person when they call.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Signs are in plain language and are easy to understand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Signs are in the languages spoken by the patient population or used commonly in the community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Patient waiting room is friendly and inviting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

 Ideas for improvement

The checklist helps you assess your practice's health literacy preparedness.

Practice Assessment Checklist

This two-page checklist helps you to identify oral health literacy strengths and opportunities for improvement and helps your dental team to quickly learn what they can do to improve patient communication.

[Download and print.](#)



What Is Teach-Back?

Teach-back is a way for you to confirm that patients understand what you've told them. It is also a way to be sure you're explaining things clearly. Use this guide to keep the basic concepts of teach-back fresh in your mind and to practice.



To use teach-back well:

1. Organize what you want to say.
2. Explain the first part of what you want to convey.
3. Ask the patient to explain it back to you.
4. Explain again in a different way, if the patient didn't fully understand the information.
5. Ask the patient to explain it back to you once more.
6. Explain the next part of what you want to say.
7. Ask the patient to explain back the latest part.
8. Repeat steps 6 and 7 until you get through all of the information.



Ways to ask patients if they understand

- I know we discussed a lot just now. It would help me know that I'm being clear if you tell me what I just said.
- In your own words, would you please tell me what I just said?
- Can you tell me what you heard me say just now?
- Will you tell me how you would explain that to a friend, partner, or family member?

Practice teach-back by yourself or with a partner.

What Is Teach-Back?

This two-page tip sheet has brief instructions on how to use the teach-back method.

- Helps you learn some easy ways to use teach-back.
- Provides a few scenarios to use in practicing your skills.

Download and print.

Oral Health Literacy Action Plan

This two-page printable worksheet helps you choose health literacy goals for your practice, then decide how to put those goals into action.

[Download and print.](#)

OHL Action Plan

Use this page to write down your action plan for implementing health literacy, as in the example below. Consider picking a few actions to implement quickly and a few to get done over time.

Health Literacy Goal

1. *Improve patient communication*

Action Steps

- a. *Use plain language intake forms*
- b. *Encourage questions at each touchpoint of patient visit*
- c. *Organize teach-back training*



Your Health Literacy Goals

1.
.....
.....
2.
.....
.....



Your Action Steps

- a.
- b.
- c.
- a.
- b.
- c.

The action plan template helps you organize the steps for improving OHL at your practice.

How to get ready

You can make your first visit to the dentist easier if you do some things ahead of time, like these:

? Things to Ask Before You Go

- Find out where the office is and decide how you will get there. Ask the office for directions.
- Find out about parking or public transportation.
- Ask if the office takes your dental insurance.
- Ask for language assistance if you need it.

✍ Things to Do Before You Go

- Fill out any forms that the office sends to you.
- Arrange for child care if you need to. You should not bring any extra people to your visit.
- Brush and floss your teeth.

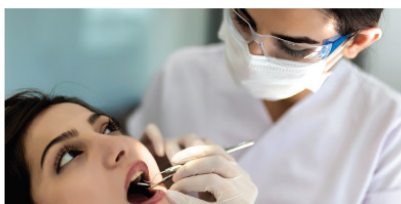
📄 Things to Bring With You

- Your insurance card.
- Any forms you filled out.
- A list of all your medicines.
- A list of your questions.
- A face mask.

Who you will meet

You will meet people in the dental office who have different jobs. Not all offices are the same, but many offices work like this:

- **The receptionist** greets you when you arrive. They help with your paperwork and tell other staff members that you have come in. You will likely talk to them when you leave as well.
- **The dental assistant** may seat you in the dentist's chair. The assistant also helps the dentist with your exam and treatment.
- **The dental hygienist** cleans your teeth and talks to you about how to keep your mouth healthy.
- **The dentist** talks to you and looks in your mouth to see if you need treatment. The dentist provides any treatments you need. An assistant or hygienist may help with treatments.



What happens during a visit

People go to the dentist for both regular checkups and to fix problems. Here is what happens at a regular checkup.



Taking care of your teeth at home and having checkups helps you avoid dental problems.

- **Discussion:** Someone will go over the forms you filled out and ask you questions about your mouth and teeth.
- **Mouth exam:** The dentist looks in your mouth and checks the health of your teeth and gums. They will tell you what they see, as well as what you should do every day at home to keep your mouth healthy.
- **X-rays:** The dentist may need to take pictures that show the insides of your teeth and the parts underneath your gums.
- **Teeth cleaning:** The hygienist or the dentist will use special tools to remove plaque from your teeth. Plaque is a sticky film that grows in our mouths.
- **Treatments:** You may have fluoride varnish or a sealant put on your teeth to prevent cavities.

The brochure helps patients understand what to expect before, during and after their visit.

Going to the Dentist patient brochure

This six-panel patient brochure explains what to expect during a dental visit and how to prepare.

- Written for people who are new to oral health care.
- Print on legal-size paper and fold for patients or bring the file to a professional printer.

Download and print.