

Dental Program Brings Latino Values To California Community

By Beatriz Roppe, Director of Health Promotion at Colaborativo Saber
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Tuesday mornings you will find Imelda Perez in front of a group of 10 to 12 mothers waving tooth brushes, dental floss, and a large plastic model of perfect teeth. Imelda will talk to the group about the difference between cleaning teeth versus merely brushing.

Imelda is one of seven *promotoras de salud*, or health promoters, who teaches an eight-week dental health curriculum called *Sonrisitas*, or Little Smiles. The program is part of Colaborativo Saber, a school and community-based organization in San Diego, California. Spanish-speaking parents, mostly mothers, come to the Sherman Heights Community Center for the program. After the *pláticas*, or talks, the parents are better prepared to help their families and children develop good oral health practices.

As a local resident of the predominantly Latino community, Imelda and her fellow promotoras, Hilda, Berta, Angeles, Rosario, and Obdulia, are the best individuals to share health information with fellow Latinas. Many parents are monolingual, far from home, confused, frightened, or suspicious of the U.S. medical and dental systems. Imelda and the other dedicated promotoras understand and live the values of the community they serve. They are proud of their community and proud of the work they do. *Orgullo*, or pride, is an important motivator for Latinas and drives the development of the health promotion work that goes on in Sherman Heights.

Culturally Appropriate Care

Sonrisitas is a culturally appropriate program that relies on the traditional Latino promotoras model to change behavior and educate the community about dental health. The model uses the natural support system that exists within the Latino community. It is an informal system that helps people and families, utilizes existing resources as well as alternative sources of support, and is based on *confianza* (confidence) and *respeto* (respect). Latinos value interpersonal relationships and turn to individuals to confide in. To assure the success of our promotoras model, the community we serve has to respect and have confidence in our promotoras and our messages.

To help ensure success, our promotoras are recruited and educated through Colaborativo Saber's Instituto de Promotoras. Colaborativo Saber's dental health program—Sonrisitas—is one of four projects and was developed and designed with input from promotoras and parents. Working together in a collaborative effort is one attribute of the Latino culture. *Colectivismo* (working together), is associated with high levels of personal interdependence and facilitates

working in unison to problem solve issues that affect the community. As members of the target community and its social network, promotoras are ideal individuals to promote health and reach their community.

The parents who attend the Sonrisitas program have *confianza* in the promotoras. Promotoras help change behavior through the Latino value of the extended family. *Familismo*, seeing the family as the primary social unit and support system, is an important Latino characteristic. The value works to keep parents open to education and information programs that will assist them in keeping the family healthy and well.

Curriculum is User-Friendly

The Sonrisitas curriculum is user friendly, has a pleasing and professional presentation. It is written in Spanish for the promotoras, who are not required to memorize the material. From the precision of the graphics and illustrations, to the quality of the paper and the binder, the curriculum values the sensibilities of the Latino culture by acknowledging the emphasis placed on appearance. The effort taken to give the materials a professional look reflects the respect the Instituto de Promotoras holds for the promotoras who use the materials and the participants who take the materials home to share with family and friends.

The curriculum fosters lasting behavior change through role modeling, group activities, skill building, and goal setting. The Sonrisitas curriculum acknowledges the high degree of family formation, structure, and function of Latino households. The curriculum accentuates the positive and recognizes that Latinos have healthy habits, including good nutrition practices as well as moderate smoking and drinking habits.

The eight-week, hour-long sessions emphasize family dental health throughout the lifespan. Topics covered include: the primary teeth and the importance of preventing baby bottle tooth decay; proper teeth cleaning and the use of dental floss; the basics of nutrition and choosing healthy snacks for children; the importance of sealants and fluoride; and locating and accessing dental resources in the community. In true Latino fashion, the classes conclude with a graduation *fiesta* where the whole family is invited and the participants receive a diploma!

For more information on the Sonrisitas program and Colaborativo Saber's Instituto de Promotoras, on developing a promotora model, or on-site training for existing promotoras, contact: Beatriz Roppe, (619) 225-1032 or e-mail beatroppe@pacbell.net ♦

