

Preschools Add Brush-and-Spit to Day

By KATIE ZEZIMA

HAVERHILL, Mass. — The twelve 4-year-olds sat in a corner, small hands claspng toothbrushes. Isaac and Aaron brandished them like swords, stabbing each other in the side. Jacky rubbed his into the carpet. Abigail squirmed, and Chayleece jumped up and down.

"You ready? Start brushing!" said Massiel Diaz, their teacher at the Basic Beginnings day care center. "Brush, brush your teeth — at least two times a day. Clean, clean, clean — fighting tooth decay," Ms. Diaz sang out, as the children moved the brushes up, down and around, connecting with teeth occasionally but also with their face and nose.

And then they swallowed the pea-size dots of toothpaste — bubblegum-flavored "Dora the Explorer" Colgate.

Massachusetts is the first state to add toothbrush time to the color-nap-snack-and-play routine of preschools, requiring that all children who eat a meal at day care, or attend for more than four hours, brush their teeth during class and be educated about oral health.

The regulations, which went into effect last week, are being

praised by some parents and caregivers while causing a tempest in a toothbrush for others, according to schools and chat rooms.

"I don't want someone's hand in my child's mouth," said Sarah Brodsky, a teacher at First Path Day Care in Watertown and mother of 4-month-old Noah. "It's a little too much" govern-

In Massachusetts, a new oral hygiene rule stirs debate.

ment intervention, Ms. Brodsky added.

"JG," posting on Boston.com's blog Moms Nation, agreed that the government might have overstepped its bounds: "We don't need the state mandating every little thing in our lives. Let parents be parents," adding, "The kids can't even reach a sink."

Parents who feel strongly about the regulation can opt out, said Sherri Killins, commissioner of the Department of Early Edu-

cation and Care, which oversees day care centers and established the regulations to help stem dental disease. According to a 2003 state study, one in four Massachusetts kindergartners have dental disease.

"Poor dental care is the most common, chronic childhood ailment, and if untreated can result in pain, infection and other devastating impacts on a child's health," Ms. Killins said.

At the Basic Beginnings Learning and Development Center here, about 40 miles north of Boston, the director, Deborah Ramos, started training her charges in early January, so glitches would be worked out by the time the regulations went into effect.

Staff members use a soft bristle to swab the gums of infants. Like other day care centers statewide, Basic Beginnings is choosing to apply so little toothpaste that it is safe for children to swallow, a practice used in Head Start programs, which mandated tooth brushing in 2006.

Ms. Ramos said there was some apprehension, but teachers quickly worked brushing into the postlunch routine.

Dr. David S. Samuels, a periodontist in Andover and presi-



CHERYL SENTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Four-year-olds practice brushing their teeth at the Basic Beginnings center in Haverhill, Mass.

dent of the Massachusetts Dental Society, which supports the rule, said in order for the program to be effective, teachers need to help children without the motor skills do it correctly. He is also worried about the spread of

germs through toothbrushes and spitting.

Alexandra Picus, director of the First Path Day Care in Watertown, said she was still working out the details of how they will herd 60 preschoolers into po-

sition. "We need to start early," Ms. Picus said. "We're supposed to have rest time, and now we have to eat a little earlier so there's enough time for the children to brush their teeth. It's not the happiest moment."