Reviewer's report

Title: Oral healthcare of preschool children in Trinidad: A qualitative study of parents and caregivers

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Reviewer: Robert Schroth

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Oral Healthcare of Preschool Children in Trinidad: A Qualitative Study of Parents and Caregivers

Review:

The manuscript is a qualitative study of caregiver and parent views of oral health of their children and how their own dental experiences may have shaped their oral health attitudes and behaviours. Focus group methodology was used to gather information about what they specifically thought of primary teeth, how they defined a healthy mouth, when to take children to the dentist, and whether their own experiences with the dental profession have affected their caring for their child’s teeth.

Abstract:

Overall, the abstract is acceptable. The abstract states that the aims of the study were to 1) explore and understand parents and caregivers’ experience of oral health care for their preschool child and 2) how this may have shaped their oral health attitudes and behaviours. However, is it also possible that parents’ attitudes and behaviours may be shaped by their past experiences and that this then could influence the way they view oral health of their children and care for their children's teeth?

The authors could consider adding some mention of parents own negative dental experiences into the results section of the abstract.

Background:

The background of the manuscript is clear and flows well. One minor comment is that it is generally Severe Early Childhood Caries (S-ECC), a sub-class of ECC that is associated with negative health outcomes in children. By definition S-ECC is a more rampant subtype.

Based on the literature cited in the introduction section of the manuscript, would it be worthwhile for the authors to reorganize the purpose/aims statement of this study.

Objectives:

Four objectives are stated. All are interesting and worth pursuing. It may be that this manuscript is a bit ambitious as it does cover a lot of topics, albeit related
and relevant. One suggestion could be to focus this manuscript on a couple of these objectives, rather than on all four. For instance, one suggestion might be for the authors could focus on objectives 1 and 4 or 2 and 3 together.

Methods:
Sufficient detail is provided on the methodology and sampling chosen for the study. The authors do state that “when enough parents had responded, the final arrangements were made to run the group session.” Out of curiosity, what was that approximate number desired to participate in the focus groups?

On page 7, the authors mention that the focus group topic guide (set of guiding questions) “was flexible during the course of the discussions, not always asked in the same order and modified when needed, to explore emerging themes in greater depth”. Were any statistics kept on this? Were all the questions eventually asked in each of the three focus groups? Is there any need to comment on this in the limitations section of the manuscript?

Many of the questions used came from previous work with other populations, but were modified to be culturally appropriate. Out of curiosity, how did the team go about modifying them? Was it through consultation with members of the community, or did the study team just review and adapt them themselves?

With respect to the topic guide, is there any chance that the sequencing of questions might have influenced the discussion and possibly introduced some bias? For instance, the question “what would be the reasons for taking or not taking your child for dental care?” precedes the questions about “how do you feel about your child’s first set of teeth?” and “how important do you think they are and why?”. Is it possible that had the questions been in the reverse order that other discussions might have arisen?

Where any of the questions in the guide follow-up questions to the preceding question? If so, the authors may want to reformat them as sub-bullets to assist the reader.

Was there a follow-up question to when is the best time to take your child to the dentist for the first time? Was there a probe relating to the new recommendations for a first visit no later than 12 months of age?

Results:
Basic characteristics about participants are provided. Was any data captured regarding the number of children they had in their immediate family and under their direct care, and how many were single parents?

Overall, the results are presented in a format that is easy to follow. The use of subheadings based on the emerging themes from the focus groups was helpful for the reader.

The section on dental care experiences of participants and how this might have shaped their caring for their child’s oral health is particularly interesting. However, there is a lot of additional information provided as a result of the focus groups that makes this a rather long section. Perhaps consider focusing only on some of
the data for this paper. For instance, is the section on “dental health advice from other professionals” worth reporting or could it possibly be removed from the results section without negatively impacting the manuscript?

One other general comment is whether the overall sequencing of themes presented in the results section can be reorganized to improve the overall flow of information.

Discussion:

Some re-sequencing of paragraphs may improve the flow of the discussion section. This may improve the flow with emphasis on the key themes that emerged from these focus group sessions. For instance, the second paragraph on page 19 could come a little earlier. In general, there are instances when there is a lot of other published literature cited, but more direct comparisons with the findings from this present study could be made. It may also be useful to provide a very short overview of key outcomes from the results section to bring this to the forefront of the readers mind.

In several instances, the authors start paragraphs with references to other studies and then later in that paragraph relate that to their own findings. This was a bit confusing to follow. Perhaps consider revising to first start the paragraphs with the original data from this study and then draw the comparison with other published literature.

As already mentioned in my comments on the methods, was there any consideration given to directly asking participants about their thoughts on the new recommendation for a child to have his/her first dental visit no later than 12 months of age?

Was the sequencing of questions in the script a possible limitation? The authors report that the sequence was also not always followed and may have deviated. Do the authors believe this might have had any influence on the ensuing discussions?

Perhaps the authors need to add a little more commentary on the next steps following this qualitative study? How do they directly see these findings changing the way health information for young children is provided to parents and how do they see this changing the way oral health care for preschoolers is delivered? Have they shared the findings with key stakeholders, the dental profession in Trinidad, and decision-makers?

Conclusion:

One interesting finding in the present study was how negative experiences of the parent can impact a parents’ decision to take their child to the dentist. Consider adding this important finding to the concluding paragraph.

References:

No comments, apart from some of the literature being cited on the impact of ECC on childhood health and well-being is a bit old. There are more current articles
(both review and original research) on this topic.

There are few minor grammatical errors that need correction, but they can be dealt with by the editorial office should this manuscript be accepted for publication.

Overall, this is an interesting article that does have some interesting findings that could possibly assist with improving oral health for young preschool children and possibly assist parents and caregivers in making better choices for their children.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.