

Breaking Barriers: Happy Teeth Brings Oral Health Education to Toddlers with Blindness or Low Vision

by Meredith Howell

For parents and caregivers, establishing a solid oral health routine for their young child is an essential part of early childhood development. However, when a child is blind or has low vision, this can be a challenging experience. Most often, kids learn how to brush their teeth by watching a family member, but when a child cannot access their vision, this can make oral care confusing and frustrating. If not addressed early on, it can have lifelong consequences. Meredith Howell, Indiana Director of Community Outreach and Advocacy and a former VIPS mom, knows this struggle firsthand. When her daughter, Lola, was a toddler, she faced significant difficulties due to her low vision and other sensory challenges. Meredith knew she needed help, but finding appropriate educational materials to support her daughter's oral health needs—and other families like hers—proved to be an impossible task. That was until she had a conversation with Dr. Nelly Chawla, Director of the Division of Oral Health at the Indiana Department of Health, which changed everything.

In May 2023, Dr. Chawla introduced Meredith to Dr. Holli Seabury, EdD, Executive Director of the Delta Dental Foundation, and Nicole Fairchild, CEO of McMillen Health, with the goal of identifying gaps in educational oral health resources for families of young children who are blind or have low vision and collaborating to make them available. Dr. Seabury and Nicole already knew the importance of inclusive education; however, after a meeting with Meredith at the VIPS Family Resource Center, they began to understand the obstacles VIPS families faced in ensuring their children had access to oral health materials that were adapted for their needs.



Rick Guidotti of Positive Exposure in New York photographed families at the VIPS Family Resource Center in Indianapolis. Photos from the shoot will be featured in the new edition of *Happy Teeth*.

The pair and their teams, along with a Professional Advisory Group (PAG) made up of passionate advocates in the blindness/low vision and oral health fields, took on the challenge of making oral health resources accessible to all children. The result? A re-release of McMillen Health's oral health board book for toddlers, *Happy Teeth*, but this time designed specifically for babies and toddlers with blindness or low vision. The book will now be in high contrast, Braille was added, and what better way to represent children with blindness or low vision than to feature VIPS kids in *Happy Teeth*.

That special addition to the project took place on July 17, 2024, when seven VIPS families participated in a photo shoot with award-winning photographer

Rick Guidotti of Positive Exposure in New York at the VIPS Family Resource Center. Rick, known for his work celebrating the beauty of human diversity, captured heartwarming images for the new edition of *Happy Teeth*. In an unexpected and generous gesture, he also offered to take family portraits for the participating parents—many of whom had never had professional family photos taken before. The experience was both joyful and meaningful for these families, creating lasting memories all while supporting an important cause.

Once released, *Happy Teeth* will first be made available to VIPS families in Indiana and Kentucky before expanding its reach nationwide. In addition to *Happy Teeth*,

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A Bright Future for ChloeAnn: How VIPS Changed One Family's Journey

by Kathy Mullen and Justine Aycock

Lea and Israel's journey into parenthood was filled with both joy and uncertainty. As a married couple made up of two partners who are blind, they knew they would encounter the usual challenges of raising a child—but they also carried the added burden of societal misconceptions. Would people doubt their ability to care for their daughter? Would they face unfair judgment from those who couldn't see past their blindness? These fears were ever-present, sometimes overwhelming. But from the moment their daughter, ChloeAnn, came into their lives, love became their guiding force. Their deep bond, resilience, and unwavering determination silenced any doubts, proving that parenting isn't about perfect vision—it's about an open heart.

Then, in 2021, ChloeAnn entered their lives—a bright, curious baby who quickly became the light of their world. From the very beginning, Lea and Israel knew they were committed to giving ChloeAnn the best possible start in life. Lea and Israel were ready to face the challenges of parenthood, eager to provide their daughter ChloeAnn with every opportunity to thrive. However, their journey took an unexpected turn shortly after ChloeAnn was born. Lea suffered a ruptured brain aneurysm, which turned their world upside down. At the same time, Israel had just accepted a new position at the American Printing House for the Blind, leaving him to juggle the uncertainty of Lea's recovery with the immense responsibility of raising ChloeAnn. The combination of these challenges put a strain on their lives, but it also fueled their determination to give ChloeAnn the love and care she needed.

As first-time parents, Lea and Israel encountered additional struggles that went beyond the usual sleepless nights and learning curves of parenthood. They faced a world that often doubted their abilities and underestimated their potential. The resources they needed to raise ChloeAnn were scarce, leaving them searching for the right support—resources that would not only empower their daughter but also

acknowledge and address their unique needs as parents. What they longed for most was guidance that could help ChloeAnn flourish while providing them with the tools to thrive in their parenting journey.

That's when VIPS entered their lives—and everything changed. From their very first interaction, Lea and Israel felt something rare and invaluable: true understanding. Rather than questioning their abilities as parents, VIPS saw their strengths. The team recognized that, like any parents, they simply needed access to the right resources and support to give their daughter the best start in life.

Through VIPS, Lea and Israel found more than just services; they found a community that embraced them wholeheartedly. VIPS provided early intervention support that equipped ChloeAnn with essential developmental tools while also empowering Lea and Israel with strategies to engage with her in meaningful ways. The VIPS Blind and Low Vision Specialists (B/LVS) helped them adapt daily routines to fit their needs, ensuring that ChloeAnn's growth and learning were never limited by outdated assumptions. With VIPS by their side, Lea and Israel didn't just navigate

parenthood—they thrived in it.

One of the most transformative aspects of VIPS was the confidence it instilled in Lea and Israel. No longer did they feel the weight of proving themselves to the outside world. Instead, they focused on what truly mattered—nurturing their smart, independent, and confident daughter. ChloeAnn, now three years old, is a testament to their dedication. She is vibrant, self-assured, and full of curiosity, qualities that have been fostered by the love and encouragement of her parents and the resources provided by VIPS.

Lea and Israel often reflect on how far they've come. What once was a fear of judgment has been replaced with an unshakable belief in their abilities. VIPS didn't just support ChloeAnn—it empowered her parents to embrace their roles without fear.

Now, as they watch their daughter confidently explore the world, Lea and Israel know they were simply parents who, like all others, needed a village—and they found that village in the VIPS community.

To hear more of Lea and Israel's inspiring journey, [tune into their podcast](#), where they share the challenges, triumphs, and lessons learned along the way.



Feeling this life
presented by **vips**

Feeling This Life dives deep into the triumphs, challenges, and strategies that are part of the lives of those who care for young children with blindness and low vision, building an audio community of families, caregivers and early interventionists.

Listen on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts.

 

LISTEN NOW



The new edition of *Happy Teeth* includes Braille, high contrast content, and photos of VIPS kids.

Happy Teeth

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parents and caregivers of young children with blindness or low vision will soon have access to adapted handouts, videos, and interactive activities that can be used with their child to make oral health routines fun and not quite so overwhelming.

This groundbreaking project provides vital resources for families, and it challenges the broader publishing industry to recognize the importance of accessibility in early childhood education. Thanks to the dedication and partnership from the Delta Dental Foundation and McMillen Health, and Dr. Chawla, children with blindness or low vision will now have the opportunity to build healthy habits in a way that truly meets their needs.

For more on the story behind *Happy Teeth*, check out this recent article featuring McMillen Health CEO, Nicole Fairchild, and Delta Dental Foundation, Executive Director Dr. Holli Seabury: <https://helenjournal.org/january-2025/the-story-behind-happy-teeth>

Want to Volunteer with VIPS?

KENTUCKY

Contact Kirsten
kschmidt@vips.org

INDIANA

Contact Rita
rdevore@vips.org

VIPS Announces Exciting Name Change to Align with Mission and Empower Families

by Diane Nelson and Leadership Team

Visually Impaired Preschool Services (VIPS) is proud to celebrate 40 years of serving young children with blindness or low vision and their families. As part of this milestone anniversary, VIPS is announcing a significant update to its acronym, which will now stand for Vision Interventions and Parental Support (VIPS).

As the first and only nonprofit in Kentucky and Indiana to provide vision-specific early intervention services, VIPS supports children from birth to three years old in homes and community settings, as well as children ages two to five through its center-based program in Louisville, KY. This change underscores the organization's unwavering dedication to empowering children with blindness or low vision to discover their unique strengths, embrace their potential, and thrive beyond limitations, building a future where they can flourish with confidence and independence.

This redefinition reflects VIPS' commitment to adopting language that clearly articulates its mission of empowering families by providing educational excellence to young children with blindness or low vision. The organization recognizes that terms like "visually impaired" no longer align with evolving standards of inclusivity, which celebrate each child's individuality and potential rather than defining them by their diagnosis. By adopting terminology that prioritizes individuals over labels, VIPS reaffirms its belief that every child is so much more than their diagnosis. The updated acronym, "Vision Interventions and Parental Support," better reflects the comprehensive services VIPS provides to all children and families. While the primary focus of early intervention is often on the child, VIPS embraces a holistic, family-centered approach. By empowering parents and caregivers with knowledge and confidence, the organization ensures that families can continue to support their child's growth well beyond the duration of the intervention, creating lasting and transformative impacts for everyone involved.



Although the acronym has evolved, families can trust in VIPS' steadfast dedication to their children's development, education, and future. Kids Town Preschool programming, early intervention visits in homes throughout Kentucky and Indiana, and support services will continue as always. The nonprofit will also maintain its current logo and branding. When asked what VIPS stands for, the organization will proudly share: "VIPS provides critical early vision interventions and parental support for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who are blind or have low vision." That has remained true for 40 years.

"We have been VIPS for 40 years and will continue to be known as VIPS," said Diane Nelson, Executive Director of VIPS. "However, over these 40 years, we have evolved and grown, focusing on offering specialized services when and where we can have the greatest impact for the most children. When 90% of a child's early learning is through vision and 85% of brain development occurs before age 6, we know that it is critical to provide educational support as soon as possible." Taylor Gehring, President of the Board of Directors and mother of a VIPS graduate, echoed Diane's sentiments adding that "VIPS is making a meaningful shift to reflect the services provided for the needs of young children with low vision and their families. Their mission is critical to establish a successful early childhood education foundation for the children they serve, as well as the families and caregivers of these children. VIPS will continue to be a pillar of excellence serving these families and children, with a refreshed acronym that serves as their North Star of 2025 and beyond."

Spotlight on VIPS Children

**Updates from the amazing
children served by VIPS!**

Send your photos and updates to David
Sharpe, dsharpe@vips.org



After the holiday break, Lorenzo and Saint have shown great social and emotional growth. Once hesitant about separation from their parents, both now enter the classroom eager to engage and reluctant to leave at the end of the day.



Miracle recently visited the VIPS Family Resource Center and enjoyed the sensory room, especially the glowing ball pit. She took in the changing colors around her, demonstrating her curiosity and engagement. We're proud to support her growth!



Brynn has been making great strides with the help of her family and VIPS teacher. She's been practicing tracking objects with a flashlight to enhance her focus and visual tracking skills.



Eden enjoys using her vision while playing with her siblings, who love showing her everything they do and create. It's a heartwarming example of how early intervention includes the entire family, ensuring everyone is equipped with the knowledge and tools to support and engage.



Waylon has had marked improvement in using his vision to play with his toys. He's been successfully putting rings on the post and moving beads around the bead maze. Keep up the great work, Waylon.



Lincoln has been enjoying playtime with blocks and puzzles on the lightbox! Using a lightbox or flashlight to light up toys is a fantastic way to help children with low vision engage with their surroundings and toys more effectively.



Felix has been making incredible progress in developing his gross motor skills. With the help of his mom and the intervention team, who are using engaging tools like shiny pom poms, shaker tubes, and rattles, Felix is steadily improving.



Demi recently had her final visit with VIPS teacher Ms. Paige, marking impressive progress. Initially struggling with uneven terrain and picture identification, Demi now navigates stairs independently, avoids obstacles, and reads touch-and-feel books.



BIRTHDAY BOURBON BBQ

**Open Bar | Live Music
Exciting Auctions**

Saturday, May 17
PROGRESS PARK
AIRSTREAM RESORT & EVENT VENUE

We are **SOLD OUT** for the main event, but don't worry! After-party tickets are still available for just \$50! Join us from 8:30–10:30 pm on May 17 for Artie Dean Harris & Bourbontown, an open bar, and plenty of good company around the campfire with cigars. Don't miss out on the fun!

If you would like to be added to our waitlist for tickets, please fill out this form. On or before April 18, we will notify you if we were able to move you off the waitlist.
<https://forms.gle/CcqtWcTxB5p26FpF8>

After-party tickets, silent and live auction, bourbon pull and golden ticket raffles, and the latest event details are available at <https://one.bidpal.net/2025vipsgala>.

We can't to celebrate 40 years of making a difference across Kentucky and Indiana with you.



VIPS Day of Giving June 27, 2025

Mark your calendars for the second annual VIPS Day of Giving on June 27, 2025! After the success of our inaugural event in 2024, where we raised an incredible \$43,621, we are excited to continue this tradition of giving.

This online day of giving is dedicated to raising funds and awareness for our mission. Set up your own fundraiser, share your VIPS story on social media, and help us reach our \$40,000 goal! It also happens to fall on the day of End of Year Celebration where we'll review this past fiscal year and honor some of our most steadfast volunteers, donors, and community partners. The evening will culminate with the Big 4 Pedestrian Bridge in Louisville lighting up in VIPS colors.

JOIN US!



Special Shoutout

VIPS would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the Delta Gamma, Gamma Iota Chapter at DePauw University for their generous creation of shaker bottles for VIPS families. These homemade noise makers serve as a great reminder that everyday household items can be transformed into fun and engaging learning tools. The gift is a wonderful example of how simple items can make a meaningful impact on the development and play of children with low vision or blindness. VIPS is deeply grateful for the Delta Gamma Chapter's support and commitment to enhancing the lives of the families we serve.

**Middletown Lions Club
47th Annual Charity Golf
Scramble and Silent Auction**



**June 9, 2025
Weissinger Golf Club • Shelbyville**

Benefiting  **vips**

Details at lionsmiddletownky.com



Walking for Dreams Family & Pet Walk

Join VIPS at the Walking for Dreams on May 18, 2025, at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis! This 3K walk is VIPS Indiana's most anticipated fundraiser, and all proceeds will benefit vision-specific early intervention services for Indiana's babies and toddlers who are blind or have low vision, along with their families.

This event is a great opportunity to give back and make a meaningful impact. Whether you start a team, participate in the walk, or donate, your support will make a difference.

Registration is Open!

In Memoriam

This issue of VISability is dedicated to the memory of:

Jack Randall Thompson, 7 months, passed away on October 26, 2024, at UK Hospital in Lexington.

Jack adored his big brother, Jude. He loved having his hair played with and was happiest when surrounded by love. His VIPS teacher, Ms. Tammy, was honored to be part of his journey.

Theo Alexander Huffman, 2, passed away on December 23, 2024, surrounded by family.

Theo's bright smile, infectious giggle, and gentle spirit brought joy to all. He loved playing with his brother, being outside, cuddling, and listening to music. His VIPS teacher, Ms. Sheila, cherished the time she spent with him and the joy he brought to those around him.

Ariel Cruz Roblero, 18 months, passed away in March from an illness. He had the sweetest smile and most infectious laugh.

Storytime returns to the VIPs Family Resource Center

VIPS Indiana is excited to again offer an adapted, accessible, and fun Storytime for VIPS children, siblings, and caregivers! Storytime will be held on select Saturdays at the VIPS Family Resource Center in Indianapolis.

Each themed Storytime session will be led by a VIPS Vision Specialist making it a wonderful early literacy opportunity for your children. After Storytime, there will be time for your kids to play in our Toddler Town, Sensory Room, large activity room, and, weather permitting, our adaptive playground!

For more information contact Sarah England at sengland@vips.org.

**RSVP suggested,
but feel free to drop in!**



**Storytime
with VIPS!**

Saturdays, 10–11:30 am

April 12, 2025

April 26, 2025

May 10, 2025

June 7, 2025

June 21, 2025

Indianapolis only. Dates subject to change

RSVP Today!

2023–2024 Impact Report



We are pleased to share the 2023-2024 VIPS Impact Report, which highlights the significant strides made in the past fiscal year, ending June 30, 2024. Over the past year, VIPS has proudly served 753 children across Kentucky and Indiana. This report captures the outcomes of our focused efforts toward our mission of providing critical early intervention services to children with blindness or low vision. We extend our heartfelt thanks to our dedicated team, Board of Directors, generous supporters, and collaborative partners who make this impactful work possible and continue to drive positive change in the lives of the children and families we serve. Download a copy today at vips.org/financial-documents/

DOWNLOAD

VIPS Acquires New Bus

As VIPS has grown, so have our transportation needs. Our large, gas-guzzling 12-passenger bus served us well, but it was time for a more flexible and economical option. Thanks to the generosity of the Louisville Downtown Lions Club and the support of Bill Collins Ford, VIPS is now the proud owner of a 2025 Ford Transit 350, a 15-passenger van.

When VIPS Kids Town Preschool was smaller, our bus was mainly used for field trips and transporting event materials. As we expanded, we could no longer accommodate all our children and their car seats, and we needed more wheelchair-accessible spaces, leading us to contract transportation services. Now, we are thrilled to have this versatile new van to transport our team members between locations. Its removable seats allow us to easily adjust for supplies, making it perfect for events and trainings across multiple states. We also look forward to using it for mobile Play and Learn programs in the future!



NEW ARRIVALS



Adrian (IN)	Cassandra (IN)	Gideon (IN)	Maeve (IN)	Ryiot (IN)
Aiden (KY)	Christe (IN)	Hannah (IN)	Magnolia (IN)	Sa'Meir (IN)
Alexis (KY)	Christopher (IN)	Heidi Ruley (KY)	Mara (IN)	Sammie (IN)
Alitzel (IN)	Dakota (KY)	Ivan (IN)	Marsiah (IN)	Samuel (IN)
Allison (IN)	Davidson (IN)	Izanni (IN)	Mason (KY)	Sawyer (KY)
Andrew (KY)	Desmund (KY)	Jace (IN)	Maverick (IN)	Saylor (IN)
Anistyn (IN)	Draylen (KY)	Jamier (IN)	Maya (KY)	Scarlett (KY)
Asher (IN)	Duncan (KY)	Jensen (IN)	Mckinley (IN)	Scottie (KY)
Atlas (KY)	Easton (IN)	Joseph (KY)	Mirielle (KY)	Shaylea (KY)
Azriel (IN)	Elise (IN)	Josiah (IN)	Nailanis (KY)	Simon (IN)
Beau (KY)	Elliot (IN)	Kalani (IN)	Samantha (IN)	Sofia (IN)
Boden (IN)	Emilia (KY)	Keegan (KY)	Oaklynn (IN)	Sophie (IN)
Braelyn (IN)	Emmarsyn (IN)	Kehlani (KY)	Oliver (IN)	Stanley (IN)
Braison (IN)	Emmerson (IN)	Laylani (IN)	Paisley (KY)	Van (KY)
Brandon (IN)	Everett (KY)	Leighton (IN)	Phoenix (KY)	Weston (IN)
Brody (IN)	Ezekiel (KY)	Libby (IN)	Quinlee (IN)	Willow (IN)
Calvin (KY)	Genesis (IN)	Lincoln (KY)	Rimiracle (IN)	Zacchaeus (IN)
Carmelo (IN)	Gerbensley (IN)	Lydia (IN)	Rowan (KY)	Zoe (IN)

Upcoming Events



A Pickleball Tournament to Benefit VIPS
 Fri, Sat, Sun, August 15–17, 2025
 Louisville Indoor Racquet Club
 8609 Westport Rd, Louisville, KY 40242



Presented by Lexington Lions Club
 Friday, August 1st, 2025, 6 pm
 Wellington Park
 565 Wellington Way, Lexington KY 40503

Thank You to Our Funders

Thanks to the continued generosity of the Etscorn Foundation, VIPS was gifted \$35,000 to purchase our 10th fleet vehicle.

The Caesars Foundation of Floyd County granted \$10,000 for early intervention services to children in Floyd County, Indiana.

We are incredibly grateful to the Fred & Opal Woosley Foundation, which has awarded us \$25,000 to support our Family Services.

The Linda Neville Trust has awarded Central KY \$36,940 for our Early Childhood Intervention Program.

The IPA Foundation has awarded a generous grant of \$8,850 to support the implementation of the PreK My Way preschool curriculum.

We are grateful to the Mildred V. Horn Foundation for their generous contribution of \$7,000 to VIPS. This support will allow us to further enhance our Early Childhood Intervention Program by providing play frames and little rooms for our youngest learners, as well as strengthening our Family Services program.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to The Cralle Foundation, Inc. for their generous donation of \$10,000 to support VIPS.

A heartfelt thank you to The King's Daughters & Sons Foundation of KY, Inc. for their generous \$6,174 donation to support our technology needs at VIPS.

A sincere thank you to The Bantz Foundation for their generous \$5,000 donation in support of our Early Childhood Intervention Program.

A heartfelt thank you to the Mary P. Gill Charitable Trust for their generous \$10,000 donation in support of both our Early Childhood Intervention Program and Kids Town Preschool.

Thank you to the George S. Weeks Trust for their generous \$25,000 gift to our Early Childhood Intervention Program.

The Copia Foundation awarded VIPS \$7,500 for the Early Childhood Intervention Program in Jessamine, Fayette, Garrard, Madison and Woodford counties, KY.

Our Mission

VIPS empowers families by providing educational excellence to young children with blindness or low vision in order to build a strong foundation for reaching their highest potential.



United Way of Bluegrass
Heart of Kentucky United Way
United Way of Central Indiana



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