

Why is Handwashing Important?



“When handwashing is done correctly by children and adults- there can be a 17% reduction in respiratory infections for young children This translates to preventing more than 100,000 colds per year.”

What is the issue?

One of the most commonly missed indicators on the Environment Rating scales is using proper handwashing techniques for children and teachers. We hear from many teachers that they are spending most of their day washing hands. They say that following the proper procedures are “impossible.” We want to clarify why handwashing is important and give some helpful tips about how to wash correctly.

Why is handwashing important?

Handwashing is the most important way to reduce the spread of infection. Many studies have shown that unwashed or improperly washed hands are the primary carriers of infections, particularly among infants and toddlers. Since many infected people carry communicable diseases without having symptoms and many are contagious before they experience a symptom, staff members need to protect themselves and the children they serve by carrying out hygienic procedures on a routine basis.

What does the research tell us?

Proper handwashing is extremely important for infants and toddlers.

Research has shown that infants are especially vulnerable to infectious disease between 6 months and 9 months of age, when the protection of being in utero wears off. From that point, it takes until children are 2 years of age before their immune systems are fully functioning. For preschoolers, studies have shown that deficiencies in handwashing have contributed to many outbreaks of diarrhea among children and caregivers in child care centers. In child care centers that have implemented a handwashing training program, the incidence of diarrheal illness has decreased by 50%. Another study found that handwashing helped to reduce colds when frequent and proper handwashing practices were incorporated into a child care center's curriculum. Finally, when handwashing is done correctly by children and adults- there can be a 17% reduction in respiratory infections for young children. This translates to preventing more than 100,000 colds per year.

So why do we need to wash correctly?

The correct handwashing procedure is as follows: Hands must be wet first with warm water, which helps loosen soil, including infection-causing organisms. Next, soap must be applied. The soap lather also helps to loosen the soil and brings it into solution on the surface of the skin. To be effective, this process should take at least 10 seconds to complete. Hands must then be rinsed, which moves the lather off into the sink, as well as the soil from the hands that the soap brought into solution. Finally, hands must be dried with a single-service dispensed towel, which prohibits the spread of germs between children. Without these steps, potential infection-causing organisms will remain on the skin and then those can be transferred between teachers and children.

So what are some helpful tips for carrying out these procedures?

The most important tip that teachers can use to teach children how to

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wash hands correctly is to role-model by washing their hands correctly. Often times it is the teachers who are not doing the procedures correctly, rather than the children. By being good role-models children understand not only how to wash but it emphasizes the importance of washing.

The second tip is to supervise children while they are washing. Children need to be reminded of the handwashing steps regardless of their age. The programs that are the most successful at handwashing are the programs that have the teachers supervising the procedures. This does not necessarily mean that teachers need to be at the sink with the children (although this is recommended for younger children and at the beginning of the school year), but that they are watching from wherever they are in the classroom and reminding children when steps are missed and praising them when it is done correctly. One helpful tip that can help children remember the steps is to have a poster with pictures of a child (preferably one of the children in the class), performing each of the steps. This should be posted at all sinks that children and adults are using. One school district made a story board out of the pictures, and children practiced which steps come first, next, etc.

Another tip for having children wash for 10 seconds is to have them sing a song. Some popular songs that are used are

“Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” “ABC song,” and “Happy Birthday.” Feel free to have the children make up their own songs, or give them a list of songs that they can choose from. Finally, if you are having trouble with the amount of time it takes to wash all of the children’s hands during transitions, one way you can do it is to wash as a group. One of our home providers came up with putting water in a spray bottle which she then sprays onto the children’s hands (hands are wet step). She then applies dispenser soap to each child’s hands, and they sing a song together as a group (soap and 10 sec. step is met). She then has them line up at the sink and they rinse their hands under running water (rinse step). Then they dry their hands with a paper towel (dry step). This process is very quick and it eliminates a lot of the issues of children waiting at the table and in line for a long amount of time.

So can handwashing be done correctly?

Yes, it can. It just takes some creativity (like what was mentioned above), some persistence, and some supervision. One thing to remember is that if children and teachers are absent because they are sick, the children are not learning. So it really is worth taking the time and effort to make sure that handwashing is done correctly.

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