

# Supporting children's hygiene skills

By Sonja Tansey

Encouraging and supporting children to follow simple hygiene rules can reduce the risk of cross infection in outside school hours care (OSHC) services and can help children to develop lifelong healthy habits. Children in OSHC settings will be able to take some responsibility for deciding when and how they should carry out hygiene tasks. However, child care professionals should take an active role in promoting children's hygiene by teaching and modelling good infection control practices.

## Why is children's hygiene important?

Infection can be spread through direct physical contact, airborne droplets or from contact with surfaces and objects. Children in OSHC environments come into contact with many other children and adults, and with toys, furniture, food and eating utensils. This high degree of physical contact with people and the environment creates a risk that children will be exposed to and spread infectious disease.

While it is not possible to prevent the spread of all infections, it is possible to reduce the risk of diseases spreading in services. Along with other hygiene methods, child care professionals can minimise the spread of infection by supporting children to develop independent and effective hygiene skills. By mastering self-care and hygiene skills, children can also experience a sense of satisfaction and increased self-esteem.

## How can we encourage children to be hygienic?

Methods for encouraging children to follow simple hygiene rules should be included in service policies and procedures. To make sure the service's hygiene strategies are appropriate, child care professionals should stay up to date with current recommendations from health authorities for children's hygiene and ensure these are reflected in the service's policies and procedures. Management in OSHC services also have a responsibility to support child care professionals in staying up to date with infection control methods.

Child care professionals can help children to develop good hygiene habits through everyday experiences and by involving them in decisions about hygiene. By regularly discussing hygiene rules with children, modelling appropriate practice and providing positive guidance and support, children's hygiene can become a central part of the daily routine.

Child care professionals can support children's hygiene by:

- role modelling hygienic practices such as thorough handwashing and drying
- setting and reinforcing hygiene rules with children

- inviting children to contribute to the development of policies and procedures for controlling infection
- providing positive feedback and support as children attempt and master hygiene tasks.

## Strategies for children's hygiene

Basic hygiene practices that children should be supported to learn include:

- correct handwashing
- dental care
- hygienic nose blowing, coughing and sneezing
- safe food handling and eating.

It is important that children also learn to avoid direct contact with potentially infectious things such as body fluids and faeces, and to place soiled items in appropriate bins. If children see discarded needles, syringes or condoms they should be advised not to touch these and to immediately inform a staff member or another adult.

## Handwashing and drying

Thorough handwashing and drying is the most effective way to reduce the risk of cross infection in child care services. It can be challenging to find time to encourage children to wash and dry their

## Practical strategies to support children's hygiene:

- Incorporate information on hygiene into the children's everyday experiences.
- Have regular conversations with children about hygiene and model appropriate practice.
- Prevent children from sharing food and utensils, and from eating food or using a utensil that has been dropped on the floor.
- Display visual and written information for children and adults about handwashing
- Provide children with protective clothing for messy activities.
- Encourage children to participate in washing toys and equipment with soapy water and to clean up after messy activities.
- Use pump packs for sun screen and hand cleansers.

hands properly. However, by making sure there is plenty of time in the daily program for routines and free play, child care professionals can work with children to promote this essential area of personal hygiene.

Child care professionals should talk with and regularly remind children about when to wash their hands such as before and after meals, and after messy activities, after going to the toilet and after wiping their nose.

### **Coughing and sneezing**

When coughing or sneezing, the National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that children be encouraged to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue, then throw the tissue in a bin, or they should cough into their upper sleeve or elbow. Children should also be encouraged to thoroughly wash and dry their hands after coughing or sneezing.

### **Cooking and preparing food with children**

It is important to discuss food safety and hygiene when cooking and preparing food with children. The following rules can assist children to hygienically handle food:

- wash hands thoroughly prior to handling food
- do not cough or sneeze into food
- do not lick fingers while preparing food
- children should tie their hair back before handling food to prevent hair from falling into the food
- handle and store food appropriately to avoid spoiling and contamination.

### **Children's toileting**

Services should have a systematic process for ensuring children's toilet facilities and hygiene equipment are clean, well maintained, safe, accessible and easy to use. It is essential that the toilet facilities that children use, including public or school toilets, are clean and have toilet paper, soap, paper towels and sanitary disposal facilities. Children should also be encouraged to tell staff about hygiene concerns if they arise.

It is also essential to develop supervision strategies that allow children to use the toilet privately and with dignity. Children in their middle school years will be maturing and may be self-conscious about their physical development. Girls may be menstruating and therefore require facilities for the private and hygienic disposal of sanitary products.

### **Conclusion**

Minimising the spread of infection is a key aspect of quality child care. Children can be encouraged and supported to take increasing responsibility for their own and others' hygiene practices during daily routines and experiences, as well as through child care professionals talking with children about the importance of hygiene and how this can be maintained ■

#### **Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance**

Principles: 2.2, 4.2, 4.3, 6.2, 6.3 and 7.2

### **References and further reading**

- NCAC. (2003). *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide*. NSW: Author.
- National Health and Medical Research Council. (2005). *Staying Healthy in Child Care. Preventing Infectious Diseases in Child Care* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Owens, A. (2005). Ask a child care adviser – supporting health and hygiene skills. *Putting Children First*, 15, 3-5.
- Tansey, S. (2005). NCAC *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Factsheet #4: Food Safety*. NSW: NCAC.
- Tansey, S. (2006). NCAC *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Factsheet #6: Infection Control in Outside School Hours Care*. NSW: NCAC.
- Tansey, S. (2007). NCAC *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Factsheet #6: Physical Environments for School Age Children in Long Day Care*. NSW: NCAC.

### **Useful websites**

- Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ): [www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au)
- National Health and Medical Research Council: [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au)
- Queensland Health Germ Busters Early Childhood Program: [www.health.qld.gov.au/germbusters/resources\\_ec.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/germbusters/resources_ec.asp)
- Better Health Channel: [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Handwashing\\_why\\_it's\\_important?OpenDocument](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Handwashing_why_it's_important?OpenDocument)



**For more information on OSHCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.**

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900  
E-mail: [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au)  
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St  
Surry Hills NSW 2010

**[www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)**