

# 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 child care services and can help children to develop lifelong healthy habits. Children can be taught effective hygiene skills from an early age, however each child's age and development will affect how independently they can manage hygiene tasks. Child care professionals should take an active role in teaching and modelling good hygiene for children and in ensuring the hygiene of babies and younger children who cannot yet care for themselves.

## 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 child care 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 child care services. Along with other hygiene methods, child care professionals can minimise the spread of infection by supporting the development of children's hygiene skills. Children's self-help and self-care skills can also be promoted by encouraging them to develop hygienic habits.

## 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.

Child care professionals can help children to develop good hygiene habits through everyday experiences by regularly discussing hygiene rules with them, modelling appropriate practice and providing positive guidance and support. Children can feel immense satisfaction and develop positive self-esteem by learning new skills such as handwashing and by having opportunities to care for themselves. Integrating hygiene experiences into the program can also make self-care fun and relaxing for children.

## Supporting children's hygiene

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

- handwashing
- dental care

- hygienic nose blowing, coughing and sneezing
- safe food handling and eating.

It is also important that children learn to avoid direct contact with potentially infectious things such as body fluids and faeces.

## Handwashing and drying

Thorough handwashing and drying by both adults and children is the most effective method for reducing the risk of cross infection in child care services. In busy child care services it can be challenging to find time to help children to wash and dry their 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 important area of personal hygiene.

Child care professionals should talk with and regularly remind children about when to wash their hands, including before and after meals, after going to the toilet, after wiping their nose, after playing in the sandpit, and after art, craft and messy activities.

## Cooking and preparing food with children

Child care professionals should discuss with children the importance of having clean hands while preparing food. The following rules can assist children's hygiene when cooking:

- Wash hands thoroughly prior to handling food.
- Do not cough or sneeze into food.
- Do not lick fingers while preparing food.
- Tie children's hair back before handling food .

## 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.

## Baby and toddler hygiene

Babies and toddlers will usually be unable to carry out hygienic self-care tasks unassisted. Child

care professionals need to take an active role in washing the hands and faces of babies and toddlers at appropriate times, including after toileting, nappy change and before meal times. If the child is able to stand at a basin, child care professionals need to help them to wash their hands using a thorough handwashing procedure. If the child cannot stand at a basin, they should have their hands washed with a moistened towelette or disposable cloth and then dried with a single use paper towel.

### Learning to use the toilet

As young children begin to use the toilet or potty they will need assistance to learn the skills required to do this hygienically. Child care professionals need to be available to support children to confidently and hygienically pull their pants up and down, get on and off the toilet, wipe their bottom, flush the toilet and wash and dry their hands. Using visual aids such as step-by-step handwashing charts depicting children in the service carrying out these procedures can be a helpful strategy. It is also vital to adopt an unhurried approach to toilet training and respond calmly to toileting accidents and bed wetting.

To help children to develop effective toileting skills, ensure that hand basins, toilets and potties are an appropriate size and height for younger children. Steps and toilet inserts may be needed to help children to reach and sit on the toilet properly and safely while they go to the toilet. Spills on or around the toilet should be cleaned up immediately by an adult to avoid cross infection.

### 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,

### Strategies to support children's hygiene:

- Make sure children's toilet facilities and hygiene equipment are clean, well maintained, safe, accessible and easy to use.
- Incorporate information on hygiene and dental care into the children's learning program.
- Have regular conversations with children about hygiene and model appropriate practice such as during meal times and when children use the bathroom.
- Make self-care fun through socio-dramatic play, books, posters, songs and rhymes.
- Prevent children from sharing food and utensils, and from eating food or using utensils that have been dropped on the floor.
- Promote dental care with children through discussions and establish dental care practices that are workable at the service.
- Display visual information for children about handwashing (these are also useful reminders to staff, families and visitors).
- Provide children with protective clothing for messy play.
- Invite children to participate in washing toys with soapy water and to clean up after messy activities.
- Use pump packs for sun screen and hand cleansers.

as well as through child care professionals talking with children about the importance of hygiene and how this can be maintained. As children develop their independence it is important for child care professionals to gauge when children need assistance and to ensure that all of children's efforts at self-care are appreciated and acknowledged positively ■

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

Principles: 1.1, 5.5, 6.2 - 6.4 and 6.6

### References and further reading

- NCAC. (2005). *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Quality Practice 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. (2003). Hand Washing and Nose Wiping. *Childcare and Children's Health*, Vol 6(2).
- Owens, A. (2005). Ask a Child Care Adviser: Supporting health and hygiene skills. *Putting Children First*, 15, 3-5.

### Useful websites

- 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)
- Victorian Government 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)



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