

Ask a Child Care Adviser: What is best hygiene practice – handwashing or hand gels?

Child Care Advisers Tanya Tregillgas and Eulalia Verde spoke with Phillip Rowell about seeking and using relevant information to support effective handwashing in child care services.

Many organisations, such as hospitals and state and territory health departments, regularly produce information for the general public about hygiene practices such as handwashing. This information is often developed in response to seasonal illnesses such as colds and influenza, as well as outbreaks of communicable diseases. While this information may be appropriate for the general public, it may not necessarily be the best information for child care services to use in developing their hygiene policies and procedures.

Children normally come into contact with more children and adults at child care than they do at home. These children can therefore be potentially exposed to a higher level of infectious illnesses in care than at home. It is also important to note that even though children in family day care are cared for in a family home, this is also a group child care environment where there is an elevated risk of cross infection.

Where available, the information used to inform a service's policies should be specifically aimed at child care settings. The National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) publication *Staying Healthy in Child Care* (4th ed, 2005) provides health and hygiene information that has been developed specifically for child care services. While this publication is aimed at long day care and family day care, much of the information is also relevant to outside school hours care settings.

What are essential procedures for effective handwashing?

There is one clear message about handwashing which every child care professional should know – handwashing is the most effective practice for preventing cross contamination and reducing the spread of illness and disease.

Staying Healthy in Child Care advises that effective handwashing procedures include:

- Using running water because this 'loosens, dilutes and flushes off germs and contaminated matter' (p.3)

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	4.3 and 4.4
OSHCQA Principles:	6.2 and 6.3
QIAS Principles:	6.2, 6.3 and 6.4

- Using liquid soap to lubricate the hands to help remove any matter, and disposable paper towels to effectively dry hands because 'wet surfaces transfer germs more effectively than dry ones' (p.4)
- Taking at least 15 seconds to effectively wash and rinse hands before drying to ensure that a good standard of hygiene is maintained (p.5).

When should hands be washed?

There are specific times when handwashing is imperative to maintain a standard of hygiene, including:

- Before preparing or eating food
- After nappy changes or going to the toilet
- After coming in contact with substances such as urine, faeces, blood and mucus
- After removing gloves
- After wiping/blowing a nose.
(*Staying Healthy in Child Care*, 2005, p.5).

Can hand gels be used instead of handwashing with water and soap?

Non-child care focussed sources may recommend the use of alcohol-based hand gels. *Staying Healthy in Child Care* states that:

Antibacterial hand washes should not be used routinely in child care centres as they are unnecessary and may encourage the development of resistant bacteria...After several uses of an alcohol-based hand cleaner, you will need to wash your hands properly with liquid soap and water (p.4).

Services should not substitute hand gels for handwashing when running water is available. Hand gels do not remove dirt or grime. Even if hands appear clean, germs that cause illness and disease are generally not visible to the naked eye so relying on a visual assessment is not effective.

However, there may be occasions when the use of hand gels or hand wipes may need to be used as an alternative to handwashing with soap and water. Circumstances in which this may occur include: when handwashing facilities are unavailable, such as during an excursion to an outdoor venue; or when children may be placed at risk due to supervision or adult:child ratios being compromised, such as when an adult has to leave the room, or go indoors to access handwashing facilities (NCAC, 2009).

Tips for supporting effective handwashing practice every day:

- Display the handwashing procedure in relevant areas around the service including the staff toilets. Include pictures of people washing their hands.
- Know the service's policy and procedures – child care professionals and other adults should be consistently modelling effective handwashing every day
- Reinforce that children and adults must wash their hands before preparing and eating food
- Think outside the square. For example, in outside school hours care, if the toilets are away from the main area, provide children with portable liquid soap and paper towels to take with them
- Explain to children why handwashing is important and how it keeps them safe and healthy. Use a variety of resources such as books and posters about handwashing which can strengthen the hygiene message
- Make it clear during recruitment and induction that child care professionals must adhere to the service's hygiene procedures

Sourcing information on recommended handwashing practices

Policies and procedure information needs to be sourced from recognised authorities to ensure that correct practices are being implemented. The following questions can help you to identify who is the most appropriate authority:

- Do the recommendations reflect the daily practices of a child care service?
- Do the recommendations specifically reflect the care provided to children in groups?
- Are the recommendations consistent with other recognised authorities?
- What are the consequences if the recommendations are implemented?
- Does the recommended practice place children and adults' health and safety at risk?

- Inform families during the orientation process about the service's commitment to maintaining hygiene through effective handwashing practice.

Conclusion

Informed, effective and positively modelled handwashing practice reduces the risk of children, families and child care professionals contracting illnesses and disease. Observing adults correctly washing and drying their hands before and after certain activities, can help children to learn that handwashing is an important, everyday practice ■

References and further reading

- Global Handwashing Day: www.globalhandwashingday.org
- NCAC. (2009). Where have your hands been? *JiGSAW*, 50, 17 – 20.
- National Health and Medical Research Council. (2005). *Staying Healthy in Child Care* (4th ed.). Retrieved 10 September, 2009, from <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/ch43syn.htm>
- Rowell, P., & Hughes, L. (2009). Ask a Child Care Adviser: Policies and procedures in everyday practice. *Putting Children First*, 30, 6 – 8.
- Tansey, S. (2006). *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Factsheet #6: Infection control in outside school hours care*. NSW: NCAC
- Tansey, S. (2009). *Family Day Care Quality Assurance Factsheet #22: Supporting children's hygiene skills*. NSW: NCAC