The Science of Hand Washing

Why is hand washing important?
Hand washing is the single most effective practice that prevents the spread of germs in the early childhood setting. Teaching children why hand washing is important, when hand washing is called for, and how to properly wash hands – as well as modeling the procedure – is part of best practices.

Who should practice hand washing?
The answer is simple. Everyone! Even infants should be taken to a sink with running water to wash faces and hands. If the infant is too heavy to hold at a sink, use a moist towelette.

When should hand washing occur?
- when caregivers and children arrive at the center
- before and after preparing, eating, or touching food
- after toileting
- before and after diapering
- after dealing with any bodily fluids
- after outside play, sand and water play, or any other messy play
- after handling pets, the cages, or other pet objects
- when hands are visibly dirty
- before going home

What supplies and equipment are needed?
- separate sinks for hand washing, diapering, and food preparation
- liquid soap
- paper or disposable towels
- running water (not a filled basin)
- warm water for children set below 120°
- child-height sinks or sturdy step stools to promote independence once children can walk
- a lined trash can
The Proper Hand Washing Routine

**Step 1**
With warm water running in the sink, wet hands; then lather hands with liquid soap. Adults and children should wash and scrub hands vigorously for 10 seconds. Wash both fronts and backs of hands, wrists, fingernails, and between fingers.

**Step 2**
Rinse hands well in warm running water until soap and dirt are gone. Hold hands with fingers pointing down so dirt easily runs off the hands and into the sink.

**Step 3**
Dry hands with a single use or disposable towel.

**Step 4**
Use the towel to turn the water off after hands are dry.

**Step 5**
Discard the used towel in the trash can.

The Art of Hand Washing

Children are naturally attracted to water and bubbles, so it is easy to make this daily routine a lot of fun. Here are some tips for incorporating hand washing into your day.

- Model good hand washing throughout the day.
- Supervise children’s hand washing and offer help as needed, but encourage a sense of independence. Respect children’s pride in being able to do something for themselves.
- Make up a 10-second ditty to help with the “10-second” rule – *This is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands, wash our hands*....
- Talk to children about the “whats” and “whys” of hand washing. Example – “We need to wash our hands now because it is time to eat. We are going inside. The first thing we have to do is wash up to get the dirt off of our hands.”
- Make the hand washing routine relaxed. Avoid “herding” children through the process. This is a good time to share language concepts – naming body parts, talking about opposites (on/off, dirty/clean, up/down), asking open-ended questions, etc.
- Hone conversational skills with individual children. “What did you do for fun today?” or “That was a great sand castle you made!”
- Tune in to each child’s individual needs. “Is your scraped knee feeling better?” or “Look how smiley you are today!”
• Plan activities for children – especially toddlers – to do while waiting their turns in the hand washing line. One caregiver can sing and do fingerplays while another supervises the hand washing.

• When washing up before food is served, children should go directly to the table to avoid recontaminating hands.

Reference