

Keeping an Eye on Children's Worries about Hand Washing

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Many preschool teachers have been impressed with how adaptive young children have been to living during a pandemic. Even children as young as two are successfully wearing masks and following new routines for shared materials. Their comfort in these new experiences can be attributed to their how well their caregivers have reinforced these new behaviors.



Photo Credit: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)

Handwashing in particular has received extra attention, and everyone from Dr. Fauci to Elmo are encouraging children's good habits. With all of this talk about handwashing, though, some children may be wondering when they are clean "enough." Teachers may have noticed that some children seem to wash their hands more than is necessary or become distressed when handwashing practice decreases.

As adults, we know that some germs are good and getting dirty is sometimes part of the fun. But lately, children have mostly been hearing about the bad germs – the ones that cause the Corona virus and can make them or their family sick. Children take their cues from their adults. The more emphasis we place on something, the more they will believe it is important.

This is normally a good thing, but it also means that children can notice adults' worries and anxieties. Watching teachers and parents frequently wiping down surfaces, disinfecting toys, and using hand sanitizer may lead some children to think a lot about germs and keeping clean. Teachers may notice that some children, especially those who are prone to worry, ask to use hand sanitizer or wash more frequently than is necessary.

There's no doubt about the fact that hand washing is the most important thing children can do to prevent the spread of many illnesses. At the same time, if a child begins to develop rituals and fixations around handwashing, adults should take notice.

Does handwashing interfere with a child's ability to engage fully in the classroom?

If they cannot wash their hands at a particular time, does a child get distressed?



Photo Credit: [Peter Wong, 2017](#)

If a child can be re-directed easily, then there is likely no reason for concern. But if teachers are noticing that a child becomes upset when they get dirty, or tantrums when they're told they need to wait to wash, it may be time to examine how the classroom environment is contributing to their fixation.

Here are some guiding principles to consider:

1. Start by validating their feelings. Acknowledge that the child is upset and avoid shaming or minimizing their distress.
2. Consider how your language and your classroom's sanitizing procedures may be cuing children to think a lot about cleanliness. Can they be scaled back or done when children are less aware?
3. Is handwashing part of the routine in the classroom? Is it included on your daily schedule? Treating handwashing as a regular part of the routine may help deemphasize it.
4. How often is handwashing occurring? As CDC guidelines regarding frequency for handwashing evolve, consider decreasing the frequency that children are washing their hands, keeping this practice to before meals and in situations that warrant additional cleanliness.

If you have additional questions or concerns about a specific child, please contact Dr. Kelley Volpe (kwilli45@uic.edu), Department of Psychiatry. Contact Dr. Kate Zinsser, Director of the Social-Emotional Teaching & Learning Lab in the Department of Psychology at kzinsser@uic.edu