

## BACK TO THE BASICS . . .

### Practical Teaching Tips for Proper Hand Washing and Preventing the Spread of Germs and Illnesses in the Classroom

By Jennifer Olson

**W**ho wants to be sick? I am guessing no one. Teachers work in a setting with numerous students in close proximity (some semesters, they are closer than others, depending on how many students you have that year). So many students spending the day together creates an environment that is often described as a germ factory. So many different types of viruses and bacteria are lurking in the school environment and are just waiting to find a new individual to attack. In my classroom, I have seen students with the stomach bug, food poisoning, the flu, strep throat, ring worm, pink eye, mononucleosis, and numerous types of colds.

Certain health habits reduce the contraction of illness and infectious diseases, such as getting the required amount of sleep, exercising, eating properly, and washing your hands. The practice of properly washing your hands and not touching your nose, mouth, eyes or facial area can make a big difference in classroom germ transmission. I have personally escaped several school flu outbreaks by being diligent about washing my hands frequently and not touching my face.

Most children learn to wash their hands at a very young age from their parents and teachers, but students of any age can benefit from reminders of the importance of keeping their hands clean to reduce germ transmission. I have worked at the middle and high school levels for close to two decades. I can tell you that many students did not wash their hands after using the restroom. If they did wash them, many times, they could not wash them properly because the water came from a timed



push-button mechanism that stayed on for only five seconds, or the soap was gone, or they had to rush to make it to their next class on time. The lack of hand washing can be the perfect vehicle for transmitting many infectious germs. I am currently in a university setting and still feel it is important to teach the basic skills of proper hand washing in my classes. It is a life skill that makes a major difference in our overall health and wellness.

The recommended step-by-step hand-washing procedure recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014b) can be found on its website. The basic steps include: wet your hands, apply soap, lather/scrub the entire hand including the back and under nails for 20 seconds, rinse,



and dry. The CDC also provides excellent teaching resources, including lesson plans and videos on the topic of germs and hand washing (CDC, 2014a).

The following are a few hands-on activities that I have used in the classroom. These are tips to help prevent the spread of germs and to increase awareness of the importance of washing hands.

## Teaching Tips

1. The first teaching tip is a visual experience. Put a small amount (0.25 teaspoon) of flour or powder in the palm of your hand and blow it away from your students. Inform the students that the flour represents germs that we cannot see and the blowing represents coughing or sneezing. This brings home the concept that we need to cover our mouths, preferably with the inside of an elbow/arm, to prevent the germs from becoming airborne around the room. It is also a healthy idea to wash your hands more often if there is an increased number of people coughing and sneezing.
2. The second teaching tip incorporates the sense of smell. Place vanilla extract on a cotton ball. Rub the vanilla-coated cotton ball on the classroom door handle in the morning. As students open the door to come in, a small amount of the vanilla aroma will transfer to their hands. After class begins, ask the students if their hands smell like vanilla. Many of them will say, "Yes." Explain that the vanilla represents a germ and how the germ is now on their hands. If they wash their hands properly before they touch their eyes, nose and lip area, they will wash away the germs and reduce their chances for contracting an illness.
3. The third teaching method includes using some roll-on glitter. If you do not have roll-on glitter, regular glitter could be a substitute. Ask a couple of willing students to volunteer for an experiment at the beginning of class. Roll the glitter on the volunteer's hands and have them continue their day as normal. After a few hours, observe where the glitter has ended up. It is typically on the pencil sharpener, other students' desks, hands, the floor, and un-

- expected places around the classroom. This activity shows how germs can spread by touching items in the classroom.
4. The fourth teaching strategy uses music. Choose a popular, yet appropriate song and play it for 20 seconds. Ask the students how long they think you played the music. Establish that it was played for 20 seconds. Ask the students what the 20-second time frame represented. If they cannot determine what it represented, tell them it is how long you should lather and wash your hands. Play the 20-second song clip again and pretend to lather your hands. This activity shows that lathering for 20 seconds by the sink is longer than most think.
  5. The last idea is to be an advocate for having the proper hand-washing supplies in the school bathrooms. If you notice (or the students start telling you because they know you care about clean hands) that the soap or towels are low or empty, then notify the proper school staff to resolve the problem. Washing your hands with soap and water is the best option, but using hand sanitizer is better than doing nothing at all. Advocate for having hand sanitizer in the classroom and throughout the school.

I have personally seen these teaching techniques work in the classroom for various age groups. These activities are quick and engaging. They have the potential to reduce the amount of germs and illnesses in your classroom and school. In closing, learning proper hand-washing techniques can become a lifelong health habit.

## Reference

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014a). *Handwashing: Clean hands save lives. Health promotion materials*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/resources.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014b). *When & how to wash your hands*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html>

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The purpose to the *Strategies* column "Educator's Corner" is to feature short articles about one specific, practical teaching lesson that practitioners at the K–12 level can immediately implement in their classroom. Articles focus on either health or physical education and contain a brief introduction, followed by very practical, quick-hitting information such as bullet points or lists. Submissions should not exceed 1,000-1,500 words (or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages).