



Handwashing in schools: a toolkit

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Contents

Overview: why is hand hygiene an issue?	3
The picture in North Yorkshire	3
Guidelines for schools	4
Advice for parents	4
Global Handwashing Day	5
Further resources list	6
Tools:	7
• Public Health England guidelines for infection control in schools	
• HSC Public Health Agency infection control poster	
• Global Handwashing Day poster (handwashing guide)	

Overview: why is hand hygiene an issue?

Globally, the majority of child deaths (more than 3.5 million) are caused by diarrhoea and pneumonia.¹ Handwashing with soap is one of the most effective and least expensive ways of preventing these diseases. However, despite extensive research demonstrating this efficacy,² handwashing is still not universally practiced.

During the winter months, the incidence of diarrhoea and vomiting and respiratory disease across the population inevitably increases. It is therefore particularly important in the run up to winter to reiterate the importance of good hand hygiene on preventing infection.

Infectious agents that cause diarrhoea and vomiting, such as norovirus, are highly contagious. They are most often spread through contact with infected individuals, touching contaminated surfaces or by consuming contaminated food and drink. The most effective measure in preventing the spread of infection is to ensure good hand hygiene.

Importance in schools

There continues to be significant absenteeism in educational institutions due to transmissible infections, much of which could be prevented by ensuring timely, effective hand washing. For example, nearly 22 million school days are lost each year due to the common cold.³ Nationally, 64.2% of all school absence in the autumn term of 2014 related to illness, increased from 58.8% in 2013.⁴ Having to take time off school inevitably has a negative effect on pupils' learning, which can in turn affect academic achievement. It can also present further problems for parents, who may be required to take time off work.

Schools also have an important educational role regarding handwashing. Learning about hand hygiene and normalising it into everyday routine at a young age provides pupils with positive habits that will last a lifetime.

The picture in North Yorkshire

Several outbreaks of diarrhoea and vomiting in North Yorkshire schools occur each year. These have caused considerable disruption in the affected schools, as well as directly affecting the health and wellbeing of those involved.

The most effective measure in preventing the spread of infection is to ensure good hand hygiene. However, the Growing up in North Yorkshire survey 2014 found that only 66% of pupils surveyed had washed their hands before lunch the previous day, suggesting that in North Yorkshire we still have some way to go to tackle not only the spread of infection but the culture surrounding handwashing itself.

¹ http://www.who.int/gpsc/events/2008/Global_Handwashing_Day_Planners_Guide.pdf

² <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/well/resources/fact-sheets/factsheets-htm/Handwashing.htm>

³ <http://www.handinspection.co.uk/Pages/edu1>

⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/428578/SFR12_2015_Text.pdf

Guidelines for schools

It is the responsibility of individual schools to provide clean, functional hand washing facilities for all pupils and staff to use. It is important for schools to encourage a culture of cleanliness, where regular, effective handwashing is normalised, and pupils feel safe and hygienic when using school washing facilities.

As highlighted by the 2010 100 Schools Survey and ongoing campaigns such as The Right to Go, significant numbers of pupils in England feel that toilet and handwashing facilities at school are not as clean or safe as they should be. The Department for Education 'Advice on standards for school premises' guideline requires that 'suitable' toilet and washing facilities should be provided for pupil's use. However, arguably we should be aiming to provide more than just 'acceptable' facilities; in order to combat the problems surrounding hand hygiene we need to provide facilities that the pupils consistently want, and feel safe, to use.

School Policy

Every school should have a clear policy regarding returning to school following sickness. The current advice from Public Health England (based on NICE guidelines)⁵ is that pupils and staff suffering from gastroenteritis should not return to school or other childcare facilities until at least 48 hours after the last episode of diarrhoea and vomiting. This can obviously present difficulties for some parents, as it may require them to take time off work themselves or arranging other child care. However, if both schools and parents are clear on the policy before such incidents occur, it will allow a firm stance to be taken by schools in the best interest of the overall school body, should the child attempt to return inappropriately.

Advice for parents

We encourage schools to communicate with parents regarding the importance of handwashing both at school and at home. An example of a brief communication is given below, highlighting three key pieces of information designed to prevent outbreaks of infection in schools. This can be used in its current form or adapted for display on school websites, newsletters and other publications.

A more detailed parent advice sheet can be found on page 12 of the 'Reducing the spread of diarrhoea and vomiting in schools' resource pack (which can be accessed via http://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/durham/fsd/files/nursery_guidance_dv_jan_2014_2_.pdf). This guidance was originally produced for schools in the North East; however, all content is nationally applicable except the local (North East) PHE team details. Contact details for the Yorkshire and the Humber PHE team can be found in the PHE guidance on infection control in schools (see 'Tools' below).

⁵ <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg84/chapter/guidance>

Parent communication template

During the winter, cases of diarrhoea and vomiting and respiratory illnesses in schools inevitably rise. These diseases are spread via contact with infected individuals, touching contaminated surfaces and by ingesting contaminated food and drink. One of the most effective ways of preventing these diseases from spreading is by making sure children wash their hands effectively, whenever they come into contact with unclean environments. This applies both at home and in school, not only to children but to teachers, parents, friends and relatives too. In order to help keep our children healthy this winter, we would like to emphasise three key messages:

- 1. Always make sure your child washes their hands in warm water with liquid soap after using the toilet, and before eating or preparing food.*
- 2. Do not send your child to school if they have diarrhoea or vomiting.*
- 3. Children suffering from diarrhoea or vomiting should be kept away from school until **48 hours** after their last episode of diarrhoea or vomiting. Even if they feel well, they are still capable of spreading infection to other individuals.*

Global Handwashing Day



We encourage schools to take part in Global Handwashing Day on October 15th. Some schools may have been involved with Global Handwashing Day before; for those who have not, the aim of the project is threefold:

1. To foster and support a global and local culture of handwashing with soap
2. To shine a spotlight on the state of handwashing in each country
3. To raise awareness about the benefits of handwashing with soap

There are many useful resources already available via the internet designed to support schools in promoting hand hygiene. These include lesson and assembly plans, as well as activity packs, posters and online resources such as videos, games and PowerPoint presentations. Links to some of these have been provided below.

Further resources list

Learning resources for schools:

<http://www.e-bug.eu/>

Free educational resource for classroom and home use, operated by Public Health England, that provides interactive teaching resources designed to complement the national curriculum for pupils at all stages (KS1, KS2, KS3 and KS4).

<http://www.kiddiwash.com/learning-resources>

Provides a range of Early Years Foundation Stage learning resources, including literacy and numeracy sheets, posters, certificates etc.

Global Handwashing Day:

<http://globalhandwashing.org/global-handwashing-day/>

The official website for the Global Public-Private Partnership for Handwashing, including the Global Handwashing Day campaign. Provides learning resources for adults and children, information on global initiatives as well as advice on getting involved at a local level.

<http://www.globalhandwashingday.org.uk/index.html>

The national website for Global Handwashing Day. Although there is currently no information available regarding this year's campaign, the site does contain a repository of resources for schools, including lesson and assembly plans, games, posters and reward ideas.

Guidelines on handwashing and infection prevention:

PHE: Guidance on infection control in schools and other childcare settings (2014)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/353953/Guidance_on_infection_control_in_schools_11_Sept.pdf

NICE Guidelines on diarrhoea and vomiting in children: diarrhoea and vomiting caused by gastroenteritis: diagnosis, assessment & management in children under 5 years (2009)

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg84/chapter/guidance>

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control report on Prevention of Norovirus infection in schools and childcare facilities

<http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/Publications/norovirus-prevention-infection-schools-childcare-facilities.pdf>

Tools



PHE: Guidance on infection control in schools and other childcare settings

Guidance for school staff on hygiene and vaccination. Includes advice on preventing the spread of infections (including infections such as flu, TB, German measles, head lice, impetigo) and guidelines for how long to keep children away from school. Also provides local PHE team contact details for reporting cases.

Link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/infection-control-in-schools-poster>



HSC Public Health Agency: Infection control poster

An A2 poster giving an overview of infection control and vaccination in schools, based on the guidance presented in the above document.

Link:

<http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/guidance-infection-control-schools-and-other-childcare-settings-0>



Global Handwashing Day Poster

Illustrated guidance on the key times to wash hands, along with demonstration of good handwashing technique.

Link:

<http://globalhandwashing.org/resources/ghd-poster/>