



Teaching Social Smarts: A Focus on Healthy Hand Washing Habits

A Parenting Guide Brought to You By: The Hangout Spot, LLC.

As we all know, children are major germ carriers, and in light of coronavirus, hand washing skills are an absolute must when it comes to keeping kids and the people around them safe. But, if your child is reliant on a constant reminder to use soap or considers the quick “rinse and run” to meet the definition of hand washing, this strategy doesn’t offer your family maximum protection. A healthy hand washing habit must be developed. Here at The Hangout Spot, we specialize in social skills instruction. With that comes teaching children healthy habits because knowing how to keep your body clean and safe is critical to making and keeping friends. So, we’ve put together a parenting guide for helping your child develop healthy hand washing habits. Follow these behavior analytic steps to stop the spread in your home today.

1. Tell your child the hand washing rules. The CDC has outlined five critical steps for hand washing success- wet, lather, scrub, rinse, and dry. Some of these words are big and confusing. So, put them into “kid-friendly” terms. Instead of lather, tell your child to “make bubbles.” Substitute “rub together” for scrub. Post the steps near the sink, and include photos for visual learners (*Check out our Hangout Spot Helper for a free, printable download*).
2. We all know that telling children the rules doesn’t always mean that they will follow them. Providing a rationale increases the effectiveness of teaching. What better way to explain why hand washing is important than a quick science experiment? Fill a small dish with water. Have your child sprinkle pepper into the water. Explain that the pepper represents germs, and germs make you sick. Now, take turns dipping your fingers into the water. Ew! You will be covered in “germs” almost instantaneously. Now, have your child dip another finger into soap before immersing it in the water. Watch what happens next. The germs will immediately disperse, leaving your child’s finger healthy as can be.
3. Model hand washing. Children learn by imitating other people’s behaviors. So, be sure to wash your hands regularly and thoroughly. Verbally describe each step as you complete it to provide repetition over time.
4. Children are often motivated to speed through self-care routines in hopes of getting back to whatever they were happily doing before. Curb the “get it done quick” attitude by teaching your child how to know when he or she can be done. Teach your child to sing “Happy Birthday” twice before turning off the water, or pick his or her favorite song instead. Or, leave a timer set to twenty seconds by the sink, requiring your child to set the timer and wait for the beep before finishing up.
5. Cue frequent hand washing by setting a timer for an hour. When the timer goes off, teach your child to drop everything and find the nearest sink. Praise children for complying with the reminder. You might even consider providing random rewards when you “catch” your child hand washing when the timer goes off, like a few extra minutes of TV time or a second story before bed. Reset the timer, and repeat throughout the day. As this skill turns into second nature, you can fade the use of the timer over time.
6. Don’t assume that your child will learn this skill overnight. Practice makes perfect, so repeated instruction will likely be needed. Observe your child washing his or her hands and provide

feedback. Point out what your child is doing right and highlight what needs to change. Doing so will ensure that hand washing isn't just a habit but, more importantly, a *healthy* habit.

7. Behaviors only persist over time when they are reinforced. So, it's important to ensure that hand washing results in a positive outcome for your child. Remember, as an adult, avoiding getting sick might be rewarding enough to get you to wash your hands regularly. But, children may not yet be motivated by this result. That's ok... we just have to teach them. At the beginning of each day, stamp your child's hand with a dark color. By the end of the day, if the stamp is no longer visible - because your child has washed his or her hands enough to remove the ink- provide your child with a special reward! Think about reinforcers that will be especially motivating to your son or daughter and incorporate them into this reward system.

Parents play an important role in transforming children's hand washing routine from a rushed chore into a lifelong habit. Hand hygiene is learned in the same way that reading or riding a bike is - through effective teaching! So, if your child has not yet mastered the do's and don'ts of clean hands, use these behavior analytic steps to turn hand washing instruction into a family activity. Doing so will have wide reaching effects on not only reducing the spread of germs and likelihood of getting sick but also helping children develop the self-care social smarts that are essential to making and keeping friends.

About the Authors

Justyna Balzar, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT) and **Meghan Cave, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT)** are the Co-Founders and Chief Executive Officers of The Hangout Spot, LLC, coming soon to Fairfield County as Connecticut's first center using the **fundamentals** of science to foster social smarts by providing instruction in a safe, fun, inclusive "home away from home" environment. The Hangout Spot is a behavior analytic social skills development center where we believe that all children have a right to meaningful relationships with others. We strive to eliminate barriers to friendship and empower children to be socially successful across the lifespan using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. Everything we do is rooted in research, empirically validated, and proven to work. We conceptualize critical, previously considered "tricky to teach" skills through a scientific framework. In doing so, we achieve socially significant change for our clients, by providing the support they need to develop real connections with other people beyond our walls.

To learn more and follow our grand opening, visit our website under construction www.thehangoutspotllc.com. Or, connect with us on Facebook or Instagram @thehangoutspotllc. Our social media accounts will be going live soon!

Wash Your Hands

A Helper From The Hangout Spot, LLC.



Wet hands.



Get soap.



Make bubbles.



Rub hands together.



Sing Happy Birthday
twice.



Rinse.



Dry hands.

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