

Early adopters

Ensuring a good foundation for the next generation

“As we started working with new hygiene routines, I was a bit sceptical. It felt like it demanded a lot of time, which is a limited resource working in a preschool. But once we had established the routines, it was doable and I started to notice that both the children and I did not get sick that often. However, the greatest reward is the collaboration with the parents. Discussions about preventing infections used to be a source of conflict, but now they know that we do our part in keeping their children healthy and then they take their part of the responsibility as well.” Josefine, Preschool Teacher, Sweden

One of the earliest signs of independence in childhood is learning to care for your personal hygiene and health. When children are born, every physical need is tended to by their caregivers. Giving children the understanding and tools to care for their hygiene and health is an essential part of raising them to be independent, creating healthy habits that can last a lifetime, and is an investment in the future generation. Whether it is potty training, handwashing, or understanding the changes in puberty, such as menstruation – hygiene is a prerequisite to ensure the well-being of children, no matter where and how they live.

Good hygiene practices play an essential role in achieving several of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) are the preconditions for human life. The United Nations named the upcoming ten years the Water Action Decade, acknowledging that clean water,

sanitation and hygiene are vital in achieving other sustainable development goals.

Safe hygiene practices are fundamental for ensuring good health and well-being for everyone (SDG 3). This is especially important for children who are more vulnerable than adults to infections. Infectious diseases, such

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as diarrhea and pneumonia, threaten the lives of millions of children every year. The good news is that they can be prevented. Simple handwashing with soap removes 90% of contaminants, and safe hand hygiene could spare



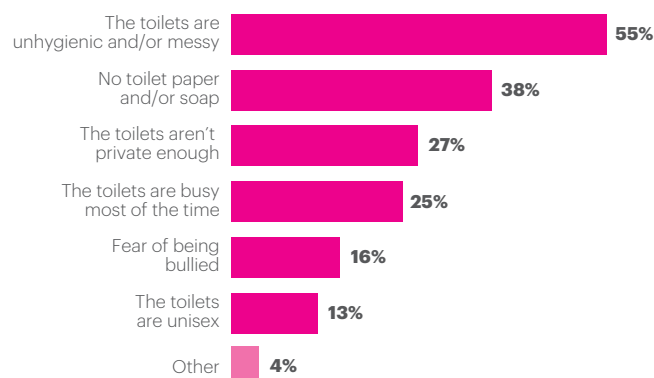
one out of three children who get sick with diarrhea,¹ and almost one out of five who get respiratory infections like pneumonia². Better hand hygiene also has a large impact in situations where infections are not life-threatening. Fewer infections among young children means fewer visits to the doctor, reduced need for antibiotics, and decreased absenteeism among parents.

A focus on hygiene is important in all arenas of a child's life, and is especially important in situations where many children are brought closely together. One such place is preschools and schools, as they can easily become playgrounds for infections. Interventions to raise the hygiene standards can prevent many infections and improve children's health and school participation. Depending on the initial hygiene standard, studies on hygiene interventions show reductions in absence rates among children, with numbers ranging from 7% up to 54%.³

Poor hygiene can also become a barrier for education and participation in the community in other ways. In many countries girls miss out on school and are in different ways excluded from their community during menstruation. Menarche, the first period, can often be a traumatic experience, since many girls are not given the knowledge to understand what they are experiencing. Learning about

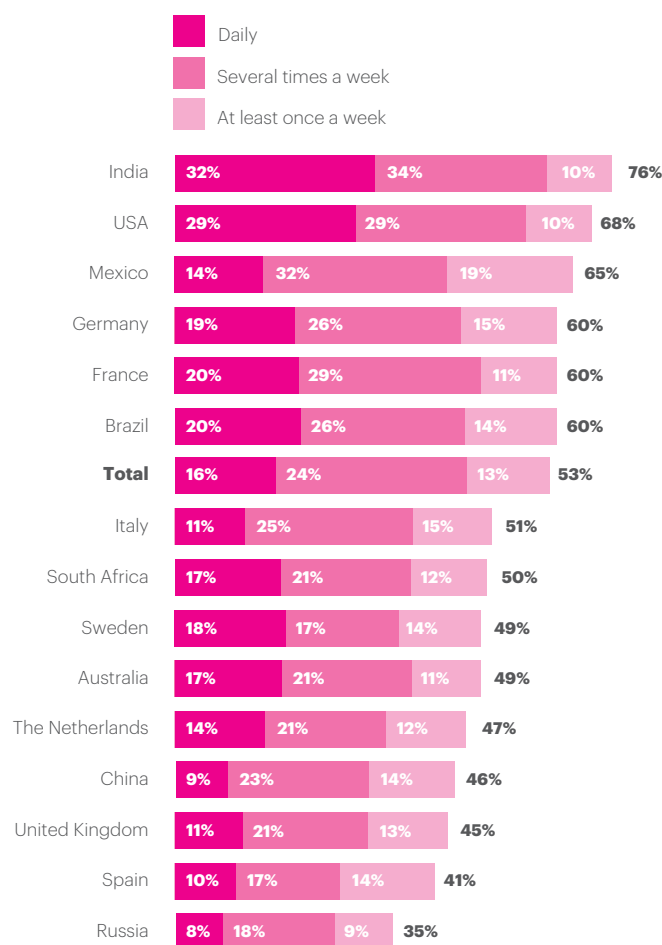
the menstruation cycle from an early age is critical, as well as ensuring that girls have the means and privacy to handle their menstruation. Safe menstruation hygiene management is therefore an important part in reaching the SDG target 6.2 on access to adequate sanitation and hygiene for all, and achieving gender equality and female empowerment (SDG 5).

Poor hygiene conditions are the main barriers for using school toilets



Good hygiene practices are thus one of the most effective and preventive methods we have to battle numerous societal challenges. A starting point is to ensure that sanitation facilities are user-friendly and accessible, regardless of age, gender or ability. Today, that is often not the case, even in countries with a generally high hygiene standard. According to Essity's global survey, 53% of parents say that their children refrain from using toilets in schools on a weekly basis. The main reasons are that the toilets are perceived to be unhygienic (55%) and lack sanitation supplies (38%).

Many children refrain from using toilet facilities in school



However, infrastructure alone does not build good hygiene practices. Creating habits demands knowledge and perseverance from every adult in children's lives. The responsibility for teaching children how to care for themselves is the responsibility of the parents, but also the local communities and the schools. The importance of hygiene and health has to be emphasized repeatedly in every area of a young person's life in order to be successful. Yet, our experience is that parents do not always understand why it is important to

talk to their children about topics like personal hygiene or menstrual health. Similarly, teachers in preschools and schools rarely have the time or support to work systematically in establishing healthy hygiene practices among young people.

Infrastructure alone does not build good hygiene practices.

Still, there are successful cases in which an increased knowledge in both schools and the overall community has created a positive circle of reinforcement. In this chapter, we will explore what benefits improved hygiene standards bring to preschools and schools, how children can be engaged in a playful way, and why it is important to talk about the changes of puberty with young girls and boys from an early age.

USD 92

return for every dollar invested

In India the return for investing in handwashing programs is estimated to be 92 dollar for every dollar invested.⁴



Investing in hygiene for life

Bringing small children together in a crowded space is a recipe for spreading infections. Some infections are inevitable, but many studies show that better hygiene standards in preschools and schools have a significant impact on illness-related absence. Marianne Bengtsson, a hygiene nurse at a local disease control agency in western Sweden, has worked for over ten years with disease control in preschools, and has witnessed first-hand how hygiene can affect education quality.

– Children’s immune systems are not fully developed and exposure to infections is part of the development process, but in an environment where children are constantly exposed to infections, extra measures are needed, says Marianne Bengtsson.

One notable environment is preschools. Children in preschools are more often ill than children that are cared for at home, which among other things leads to unnecessary use of antibiotics. Since 2006, Marianne

Bengtsson has worked as a hygiene nurse assisting preschools in western Sweden. Her work was initiated as a project by the local disease control department as a way to prevent infections, reduce the usage of antibiotics, and battle antimicrobial resistance.

– They received a lot of calls from the preschools regarding infections. The staff working in preschools have not received any education in hygiene and health, and there are very limited resources available for them to gain the necessary knowledge. That’s why we have introduced specific hygiene nurses that can support the preschools.

Today, the project has been turned into a permanent branch of the local disease control department and expanded into several municipalities in the region. Among other things, the hygiene nurses educate the preschool teachers, inspect the hygiene facilities and routines, monitor the infection rates and develop education material and methods for teaching the children.

A key part of their work is monitoring the absence rate in the preschools. Statistics show significant differences between municipalities, districts, and even departments within the same preschool.

– There are preschools that have absence rates of about 20%, where the average child has missed school every fifth day, while in other schools they have only missed every tenth day. Children who attend schools with a higher absenteeism among students and teachers, miss out on a lot of opportunities to learn. Preschool lays the foundation for future education, and these children simply do not get the same chance, says Marianne Bengtsson.

Preschools that have gone through this program and learned how to achieve better hand hygiene have shown improved absence rates between 7-13%. In a region with a population of 1.7 million, the program produced yearly savings of USD 5.5 million, 10,000 fewer doctor visits and 3,000 fewer prescriptions for antibiotics.⁵

Even though there are clear benefits in improving school attendance, few preschools and schools keep track of their statistics.

– The responsible authority, in this case the municipalities, should monitor the absence rates in their preschools and schools. This is not only a tool for working with hand hygiene, by better statistics you can identify other problems as well. In our project we have found cases of mold and dampness by looking at the absence rates.

Apart from closer monitoring, Marianne Bengtsson also wishes for clearer rules in hygiene facilities in preschools and schools.

– Today there are recommendations, but they are not enforced. We visit a lot of preschools, even newly built ones, where the layout makes it difficult to achieve good hand hygiene.

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Success factors for implementing good hand hygiene in preschools:

- **Basins, soap, and paper towels** that are **easily accessible** for both children and teachers.
- A **hygiene sponsor** among the teachers who can adapt routines to the specific school's situation.
- Educated teachers that understand **why hand hygiene is important and have enough time** to make sure all children wash their hands according to the routines.
- Parents and other adults around the children that **lead by example**.
- **Playful ways**, such as songs, rhymes, and games, to establish hand hygiene routines.

Playfulness – key to establishing good hand hygiene practices

Helping children to develop good hygiene habits early on lays a foundation for the rest of their lives. The key to success is turning the education into fun and memorable activities for the children.

Engaging children in a playful way by using storytelling and games have proved a success factor in establishing good hygiene routines. Essity has long worked with developing educational material together with and for both teachers, parents, and schools. The material includes two tool kits aimed at children, teachers, and parents. “Ella’s Hand Washing Adventure” includes an app for younger children, hygiene brochures and educational material aimed at caregivers, while “Max’s Hand Washing School” consists of educational material to be used in schools for older children.

Essity’s employees also work with and regularly visit preschools and schools to share their knowledge on hand hygiene. Key is to arouse the children’s curiosity to understand the underlying principle between germs,

hygiene and health, for instance by using experiments. One such experiment involves sticking dry and wet hands into sand to demonstrate the importance of drying the hands, while another one uses UV light to let the children see for themselves how much dirt is left after a mediocre hand wash.

Menstrual hygiene management education – the earlier, the better

Menarche, the first period, is a fundamental part of a girl’s transition from childhood to adolescence. Studies show that girls in many countries experience menarche with insufficient information and support. Girls from around the world report feeling ashamed and afraid. The potential health effects of such experiences include a weakening of girls’ sense of self-confidence, which in turn may compromise girls’ abilities to assert themselves in different situations, including their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health.⁶



“Menstruating women and girls are forced into seclusion, suffer reduced mobility and dietary restrictions, and can be prevented, through cultural norms, from participating in daily activities. Despite, or perhaps because of this, menstrual hygiene has been routinely ignored by professionals in the water sector, and in the health and education sectors too.”

Catarina de Albuquerque, former Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescence is defined by a rapid development process from a young child into puberty, an indicative age range when it usually occurs. Puberty education, whether in school or through the community, is usually provided to children at the average age that it occurs: 12 or 13 years of age. For many girls, especially in developing countries, the information is given too late (if it is even given at all). Some girls have their first period as early as age nine. In some cultures, menarche can indicate that a girl is ready for marriage, or that she must stop engaging in child activities, such as playtime, and begin supporting the household.

Since 2012, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) has used a holistic methodology on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) to ensure that women and girls have access to information about the biological processes surrounding menstruation, as well as hygienic methods for managing their periods, so that they can make informed choices. WSSCC’s methodology aims to provide information on puberty and menstruation as early as possible before puberty begins.

Asha, an 11-year-old girl from Assam, India shared her menstruation experiences and difficulties during a recent training session. She spoke not only about the lack of information and confusion when she had her first period, but how her daily life changed during each menstruation.

– Sometimes I stay away from school as it is too difficult to sit through classes all day without proper places to change and wash without my classmates and teachers knowing that I have my period, she said.

Asha and other girls participating in the session received information on the menstrual cycle from WSSCC trainers who are specialized in dispelling myths and taboos in a cultural context. Trainers also share a comprehensive visual guide entitled “As We Grow”, which

reinforces positive messages and describes physical and emotional changes for both boys and girls going through puberty. In addition to women-only discussions to ensure a safe environment for open discussion, the methodology also includes complementary training specifically targeted at boys and men.

There are three critical steps to ensuring safe MHM:

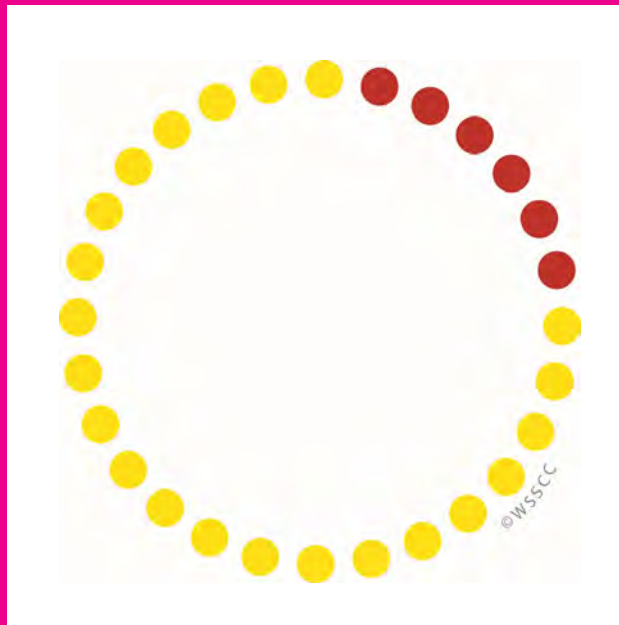
- **Breaking the silence.**
Understanding that menstruation is a fact of life, and a distinct biological female attribute that girls and women should be proud of, not ashamed by. Girls are encouraged to talk and discuss in an informed and positive manner to prepare them emotionally and physically for menarche and recurring monthly menstrual periods thereafter.
- **Managing menstruation hygienically and safely.**
Ensuring adequate water, cleaning and washing materials and private spaces for managing menstrual flows hygienically and privately, managing pain and/or any related issues with dignity, in the home and in public spaces.
- **Safe reuse and disposal.**
Ensuring mechanisms for safe reuse, collection and disposal of menstrual waste with dignity in an environmentally safe manner.

Menstrual hygiene management bracelet

To support and reinforce its work on menstrual hygiene WSSCC has developed a Menstrual Hygiene Management Ring in collaboration with the Indian designer Lakshmi Murthy. The illustration appears in reports and communications, and is also used as an advocacy bracelet in trainings with women and girls. Its beads and colors represent the menstruation cycle. The ring helps to emphasize that menstruation is something to be proud of each month and something to be discussed, not ignored.

During the MHM trainings, women and girls make the bracelets themselves according to their individual menstrual cycle, and then wear the bracelets while taking a pledge to speak about menstruation inside and outside of the home in order to break taboos. The bracelet has been worn by women and men, including government officials, champions and activists from China, Finland, India, Kenya,

The Netherlands, Niger, Portugal, Senegal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, and the United States as champions for raising awareness for the importance of MHM and drive change.



Menstruation needs to be put higher on the health agendas

Dr. Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli works with Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in the World Health Organization's Department of Reproductive Health and Research. Over the last 20 years of his work on adolescent health, he has seen menstruation move from a non-issue to the fringes of the global health and development agendas. He believes that to bring out the institutional and social norm changes needed, menstruation has to be higher on both the global and national agendas.

Chandra-Mouli regrets that a perfectly normal stage of development – menarche – and a perfectly normal human function – menstruation – have been clouded by taboo and stigma.

– In different social and cultural contexts, menstruation evokes discomfort because of its association to sexuality and reproduction, shame because of girls' inability to manage it effectively, and exclusion because of its association with impurity. This hinders girls' abilities to carry out everyday activities, weakens their self-esteem and self-confidence, and sets a foundation for poor healthcare seeking behavior.

According to Chandra-Mouli's research and experience, many adolescent girls in low and middle-income countries are uninformed and unprepared for menarche. They are excluded and ashamed of their periods. Lack of access to menstrual products and to water and sanitation, hinders them from taking care of themselves, and taking charge of their lives. And when they do need care at home or in a clinic, they do not get it.

– It is essential for girls, as well as boys, to be informed about puberty and menstruation from an early age. Both girls and boys need to know that puberty and menarche are normal life stages. As their bodies and minds mature, they need and have the right to understand the changes they will experience and how to manage them effectively. Ideally, information should not only be provided at homes and schools, but also from other adults, such as sports coaches, who play an influential role in adolescent lives.



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WHO advocates for girls to grow up in a context where menstruation is considered healthy and normal; where all girls are well-informed, have access to sanitary products, and receive the support they need.

– This is happening in some places through the efforts of certain individuals and organizations. In order for this to happen on a larger scale, long-term programs, thorough leadership, management and investment are needed. Parliamentarians and government leaders are crucial for making this happen. Ultimately, menstruation needs to be high on their agendas for real change to occur.

Early adopters

– next step

Investing in children's and adolescents' hygiene and health is an investment that yields returns both short term and long term. As children are particularly vulnerable to infections, good hygiene routines is an important preventive tool to ensure healthy children here and now, but it also lays a foundation for their future lives. To establish healthy habits, children should be introduced to topics of hygiene and health from an early age and in all spheres of their lives. All adults play an important role here, whether parents, teachers or other community members. To reach children, it is thus important that adults understand the link between hygiene and health and have the tools to engage children in a playful way.

The earlier topics of hygiene and health are introduced, the better. This is particularly true for questions concerning puberty and menstruation. Far too many girls experience their first period as a traumatic event, which is not only frightening but can also lead to social exclusion. Information in time is essential so that girls have an understanding of what they are going through and have the means to handle their menstruation.

Today, we know what it takes to ensure that all young people have the means to stay healthy. To achieve these goals broad coalitions are needed where all actors come together to drive progress.

Calls for action:

- **Make access to clean water sanitation facilities a priority.**
All children and adolescents need access to clean water and safe sanitation facilities, whether it is at home, at school or out in the community. It is especially important that girls have access to gender segregated hygiene facilities where they feel safe and are able to manage their menstruation.
- **Elevate knowledge, attitudes and practices, through public policy tools.**
Parents, teachers and the wider community has to be given the resources (knowledge and time) and tools to practice safe hygiene habits and teach their children about how to do the same at an early age.
- **Make hygiene a priority at school and other places where children are present.**
All preschools, schools and other places where children are present should have the necessary facilities and training to practice good hygiene, such as hand washing. Hygiene and health-related topics should be included in the curriculum and the root cause for absence rates followed closely.