

Learning to wash hands again, this time more carefully

Adults teach young children the basic hygiene rules of washing hands from a very young age. We wash hands when they are dirty, before eating, and after using the toilet. We teach our children a reasonably thorough method that is likely to get general grubbiness and grime off, and on the whole with a few exceptions it is successful. Children and adults usually know how to wash their hands, but sometimes forget to do so.

In a pandemic this is not enough. We are all required to wash our hands in a more thorough way to eliminate any trace of virus in order to prevent infecting ourselves and passing it on to others. Viruses on our hands picked up from touching things transfer to our face and find their way into our body resulting in illness. The problem is we cannot see a virus in the same way as we might notice a smidge of dirt left behind after a quick wash of a dirty hand.

Most of the information we have received tells us to wash our hands for a prolonged period of 20 seconds, singing a song to ourselves or counting to remind us to continue washing longer than we normally would. We tell our children to follow the 20 second rule and facilitate that for them by encouraging them to use their special interest to make it fun. But the information we, and our autistic friends and family may be missing is *how* to wash to eliminate virus from all surfaces of our hands. A child or adult with autism may feel patronised when asked to wash their hands in a new way as they have already learned this skill as a young child. For those that are challenged by reading the implied context of the situation, information may be missing. We need to fill that information in so that the instruction makes sense.

We need to be cautious though, as an over emphasis on germs may stimulate an obsessive interest which could make life very difficult in months to come. We want to establish good effective handwashing at all times but extra careful handwashing at times when there is a dangerous infection about like at the moment.

I have found that providing visual concrete evidence to support the information I am sharing is always helpful. In a previous post I mentioned the 'cocoa-virus technique' using cocoa powder on the hands to demonstrate to a child/adult how viral particles can shed with a simple touch on household items and all over our faces. This can be used again to help with the technique of handwashing. An adult covers both hands all over with cocoa powder back and front, between fingers, up to the fingertips and around the base of both thumbs. Then they wash their hands like they normally do. Asking the child or adult to 'spot' any residues focusses their attention on missed places – the back of the hands, between the fingers etc. This is helpful work to do before reading the following Story, which provides useful information on why we need to learn to wash hands in a new more careful way and also the detailed steps required to do so.

In the following Article turning the tap off after handwashing using the paper towel or a clean tissue is described. This is important because the tap was turned on by a hand with possible virus on it. If the cleaned hand is subsequently used to turn the tap off, the hand gets virus back onto it. Keep some tissues by the tap for this purpose alone.

I have used the WHO recommended directions for handwashing which Carol Gray kindly shared with me. Lets' share this Story and make this new skill make sense for our young and old people on the autism spectrum!