



Center for Family Policy  
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## Effective Personal Care Routines

*Personal care routines, such as health and sanitation practices are challenging for early childhood programs. This Recommended Practices document focuses on research findings in this area and provides early childhood teachers with ideas on how to strengthen these caregiving practices.*

### Background

This document reflects research findings from over 155 early childhood programs located in both urban and rural communities across Missouri (data collection occurred 2009-2011). Classroom observations were conducted by trained and reliable data collectors using the Early Childhood Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R). The ECERS-R examines the quality of the preschool classroom environment.

Based on the research findings from these classroom observations, the data indicate personal care routines, including health and sanitation practices, are challenging for early childhood programs and classroom teachers across the state of Missouri. Only one area, children's arrival and departure from the program, was found to have a high score (the mean was 6.0 on a 7 point scale). Unfortunately, scores were low for all other aspects of personal care practices with the mean scores ranging from 1.74 - 3.86 (on the 7 point scale). The specific areas of concern, along with recommendations, are presented below.

#### #1: Activity during meal/snack times

It was found that teachers do not always interact with children during meal/snack times. As a result, key opportunities to model and teach social and practical skills are lost. To improve in this area, teachers can:

- Sit and talk to the children during each and every snack/meal time. Teachers can take the opportunity to talk to the children about the events of the day, the food they are eating and the things the children are interested in.
- Help children learn new skills and increased independences by giving them child-sized eating utensils and teaching them how to use them.
- Allow children to help set or clear the table, wipe up spills, and sweep the floor.

#### #2: Nap time practices

It was found that teachers do not always make nap time comfortable for children. As a result, it may be difficult for children to relax and get the rest that they need. To improve in this area, teachers can:

- Help children who have a hard time relaxing (by giving them a cuddly toy or rubbing their backs).
- Create a calm environment by keeping the lighting dim and playing relaxing music.
- Make sure that all cots or mats are at least 3 feet apart.

#### #3: Toileting/diapering practices

It was found that areas for meeting toileting/diapering needs are not always convenient or easy to maintain. This is clearly a sanitary concern; however, it may also impact the degree to which children are able to successfully learn self-toileting skills. In order to improve in this area, teachers can:

- Keep the toileting area close by; if needed, stairs or handrails near sinks/toilets should be in place.
- Make sure that sanitary conditions are easy to maintain. For example, teachers should keep diaper wipes close by. Warm running water is essential.
- Promote self-help toileting skills as children physically grow and cognitively mature.

#### **#4: Health practices**

It was found that good health practices are not always modeled by the teachers. This is of particular concern since young children watch adults and learn by their example. This becomes a prime opportunity for children to learn good hygiene habits. To improve in this area, teachers can:

- Demonstrate good habits by eating healthy foods in front of children. Of particular importance are fruits and vegetables.
- Checking/flushing toilets in the children's bathroom frequently and talking with the children about keeping the restroom area clean.
- Teach children how to wash their faces frequently and brush their teeth.
- Assist the children in changing clothes that are soiled or dirtied from activities.

#### **#5: Safety plans**

It was found that safety plans are not always obvious or in place. Not having clear safety rules or emergency plans put the children at increased risk. In order to improve in this area, teachers can:

- Make sure that children are aware of safety rules and practices. Encourage discussions with the children about why these rules and practices are important.
- Post emergency procedures in a location that can be easily seen by teachers, children and parents.
- Make sure that phones, first aid kits, and other necessary items are easily accessible.

#### **Impact on Children and Families**

Young children need to be in an environment that is safe, clean, and engaging, with well-established personal care routines. When such a foundation is provided, children learn the knowledge and skills they need in order to become more independent. They also learn what to do in emergency situations. When the foundation is lacking (as is the case with many early childhood programs in Missouri), children are at greater risk during emergencies and they also face increased challenges for learning some of the essential life skills related to self-care. This document provides a "blueprint" for ways in which Missouri programs can swiftly address this very important concern.

(Mascendaio, P. & Hawks, J., 2011)