

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

to handwashing for
young children: Kisumu

SUMMARY

Handwashing with soap is the single most effective way to stop the spread of infections. Although children under five carry the highest disease burden of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)-related health problems in Kisumu County, they are overlooked in most handwashing programmes. There are particular barriers in low-income settlements. Public health messages can be too theoretical, and handwashing facilities are not easy to use for young children. This Brief is based on Practical Action's field experience and research in Kisumu. It sets the agenda for strengthening handwashing practices among the under-five age group.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement** handwashing policies and strengthen practices for all children under five, with better standards and guidelines for public health officers and community health volunteers.
- **Promote handwashing** through Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDCs) as a focal point of good handwashing practice for younger children in the community, encouraging learning and sharing of ideas by all stakeholders.
- **Promote innovative, replicable and sustainable** handwashing solutions in the community and schools that are inclusive of children under five, building on the greater emphasis on handwashing during COVID-19.

STANDARD HANDWASHING PROGRAMMES

Children under-five are a particularly vulnerable group for WASH-related health problems – especially in low-income settlements. Diarrhoea and pneumonia are leading causes of illness and death for children under five years. Children in informal settlements are even more vulnerable as they are more likely to come into contact with contaminated water and air pollution, leading to high prevalence of infectious diseases. Frequent handwashing with soap is one of the most effective ways to significantly reduce the prevalence of illnesses and disease, including coronavirus (COVID-19).

There are no specific standards or guidelines on promoting handwashing for children under five.

The Kisumu County Environmental Sanitation and Hygiene Bill (draft) (2018) requires all schools and pre-primary schools to provide ‘an adequate supply of clean and safe water for drinking and running water for handwashing’. It provides a broad framework for the enforcement of WASH standards in pre-primary school; however, Kisumu County is yet to develop guidelines for the provision of WASH services and education for children under five years, in either the household or learning institution setting.

Standard hygiene messaging can be ineffective for under-fives. Currently, in educational settings and at home, children’s handwashing practice is targeted broadly through public health messaging. This often does not lead to sustained change in handwashing behaviours, especially if not combined with appropriate infrastructure. At household level, public health officers and community health volunteers (CHV) are tasked with conveying safe hygiene practices; however, these roles are under-resourced, and there is no specific training on WASH for the under-fives. This is needed because children under five may not be easily able to manage handwashing stations and soap unsupervised. Young children rapidly go through a range of developmental stages with different needs and challenges. For example, babies and toddlers may be more prone to putting objects and hands in their mouths, so specific advice for this stage would be useful. As children become more independent, guidance could help parents and caregivers to support



Photo 2 No guidelines exist for handwashing in pre-primary

children to develop good handwashing habits and eventually be able to manage routine handwashing by themselves.

There is no comprehensive guidance for caregivers on how to ensure children under the age of five years effectively learn and practise proper hygiene habits; the messaging is predominantly targeted at parents and caregivers and not the children themselves. The messaging, cues, and ‘nudges’ for handwashing need to be better designed to appeal to under-fives. The lack of WASH information, education, and communication guidelines for caregivers and children under the age of five years remains a major impediment to achieving the goals of universal access to safely managed WASH in Kisumu County.

Inadequate handwashing facilities for children under five. The Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (UNICEF and WHO, 2019) reports in Kenya that 40 per cent of households have no handwashing facility and 35 per cent have a handwashing facility on premises without soap and water (defined as a limited service). In Kisumu, while caregivers and teachers have been found to have a good knowledge of hygiene and instruct children to wash their hands after visiting the toilet and before eating, this does not necessarily translate into practice.

In educational settings, only 65 per cent of primary schools in Kisumu County have handwashing facilities (Oyaya et al., 2019), and WASH and hygiene interventions for pre-primary children are typically lower than this. Barriers to good hand hygiene in pre-primary schools include lack of budget for piped water supplies, soap, and other hygiene and cleaning materials; and hygiene products and equipment are not considered a budgeting priority. County Government funding for ECDCs is typically directed towards staff and classroom infrastructure with little to no funding allocated to WASH facilities and maintenance. Taps, sinks, and soap products are often inaccessible for young children, especially when large numbers of children need to wash their hands at the same time, such as before meals. Handwashing facilities are often not inclusive for children with disabilities.



Photo 1 Children under five may not be easily able to manage handwashing stations and soap unsupervised.

IMPROVING HAND HYGIENE: FACILITIES AND BEHAVIOURS

Global experiences in handwashing suggest some of the most successful approaches that could be adapted for the context in Kisumu.

Life-skills and behavioural nudges

Current handwashing schemes that teach handwashing through public health messaging, where teachers use storybooks, colouring pages, or interactive workbooks, often does not lead to a sustained change in behaviour, especially if not combined with appropriate infrastructure.

Life-skills is a teaching-learning approach developed by UNICEF and others that is specifically designed to enhance efforts to positively develop or change behaviour. Group handwashing is a life-skills approach that reinforces the habit of good hygiene behaviour and uses social norms and peer encouragement to strengthen healthy actions (UNICEF, 2016). Supervised daily group handwashing from an early age before eating the school midday meal is an effective strategy for building and sustaining hygiene habits. Nudges are reminders that can promote handwashing with soap after leaving the toilet. A nudge could be a brightly coloured path from the latrine to the handwashing station or painted footprints on paths leading to the handwashing station and handprints on the handwashing station (see Photo 4) (Dreibelbis et al., 2016).

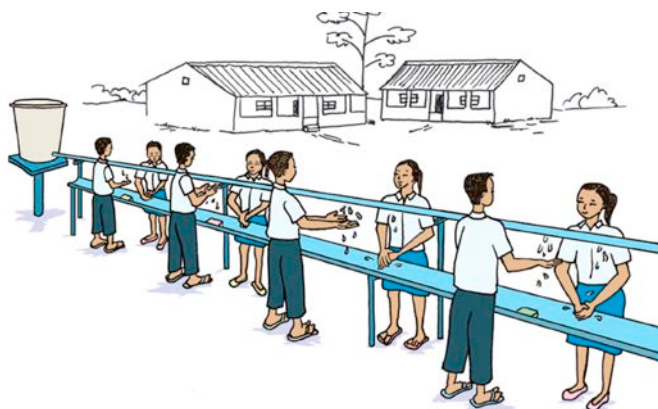


Figure 1 Alternatives to single tap handwashing stations

Handwashing messages can also be reinforced through speaking walls (murals on school or toilet block walls). At home, a visual graphic or objects can be used as a reminder for handwashing.

Child-friendly handwashing stations.

Handwashing facilities also need to be child friendly. They need to be the right height for children to reach, have multiple high-quality taps that can be used with minimum contamination risk, and use minimal water (see Figure 1). A purpose-designed, freestanding handwashing station can be used where piped water is not available.

There are opportunities for the private sector to address this gap in the market: for example, the Jumbo Poa tank was found to be the closest ideal to the Kisumu market (see Photo 3) (OPERO Services, 2019). New designs, some of which are touch-free, have also been emerging with the emphasis on handwashing during COVID-19. Soaps should be dispensed in a way that allows small amounts to be accessed, keeps the soap itself clean, and is comfortable for children to reach and use. Povu Poa or 'Cool Foam' stations (designed by Innovations for Poverty Action and Catapult Design) use a pump to produce foaming soap, which children find easier and nicer to use (OPERO Services, 2019).

THE WAY FORWARD

Implement handwashing policies and strengthen practices for all children under five.

There is a need for the County Government of Kisumu through the

County Departments of Health, Water and Education to develop and strengthen the policies and practice for handwashing for all children under five years in line with the Constitution of Kenya and the National and Kisumu County Environmental Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (KESHP). This would include developing guidelines and standards for child-friendly handwashing hardware in educational and home settings, as well as guidelines on behaviour change communication, specifically targeting handwashing in children under the age of five years.

Promote handwashing through ECDCs as a focal point for good handwashing practice for younger children in the community.

In line with the KESHP and the Kenyan pre-primary revised curriculum, ECDCs can, and should, be used as focal points for promotion and the empowering of children to be agents of hygiene behaviour change. ECDCs are expected



Photo 4 Nudges including: dedicated handwashing station, paved paths, and painted foot- and handprints. Source: Dreifelbis et al., 2016



Photo 3 The Jumbo Poa tank – a stand-alone handwashing station, available in Kisumu

to integrate basic health and hygiene practices in the learning programmes, targeting the children in these formative education centres by adopting a life-skills approach. If schools can link better with CHVs and the wider community, the benefits can be shared. Kisumu County Government needs to operationalize handwashing as a life-skill from pre-primary ages in educational settings and adopt the life-skill approach in the wider community.

Activities in educational settings can be combined with community activities that target parents or carers through community meetings and house-to-house visits. Practical Action has developed a pupil-led hygiene promotion approach, whereby older school children support younger children in their communities and schools. School staff can also promote key WASH practices and hygiene behaviours (i.e. handwashing facilities such as tippy taps) with parents. ECDCs and community health workers can be supported to share best practices and learn from each other. Lessons learned from testing innovative methods with young children in pre-primary schools can be shared with CHVs to help them to promote safe hygiene among children and their families at home.

Promote innovative, replicable and sustainable handwashing solutions in the community and schools that are inclusive of children under five years post COVID-19.

Handwashing with soap is the single most effective way to stop the spread of infections. There is a need for the County Government of Kisumu through the

County Departments of Health and Water to promote good hygiene practices. This can include:

- providing training for public health officers and assistants, sanitary inspectors, community health officers and assistants, water officers, CHVs, and caregivers on how to promote and support WASH behaviour change with children under five years;
- taking time to listen to the needs and experiences of caregivers (parents, relatives, and house helps), and using this to improve the BCC model and messages.
- reviewing and enriching the CHV WASH training module for informal settlements to suit the needs of children under five years.

COVID-19 has shown even more clearly the importance of good handwashing with soap as a barrier to the spread of diseases, protecting ourselves and others in the community. New handwashing stations are being installed in public spaces and homes in Kisumu. We should grasp the opportunity to ensure that the needs of children under 5 are met, and that this new focus translates into lasting change.

References

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About Practical Action

We are an international development organization putting ingenious ideas to work so people in poverty can change their world. Our vision is for a world that works better for everyone.

We help people find solutions to some of the world's toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

We believe in the power of small to change the big picture. And that together we can take practical action to build futures free from poverty.

Big change starts small.