

# Tips for Personal Hygiene and COVID-19 Mitigation Behaviors to Children Returning to School



Center for Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy and Central Ohio Primary Care:  
**Total Care through Co-Location**®

Enhanced Behavioral Healthcare through Co-Location in Primary Care

## Pandemic Response and Personal Hygiene?

Generally speaking, frequent personal cleaning habits under non-pandemic conditions can sound a bit obsessive-compulsive. That's because the ritualized behaviors aren't responses to a real threat. That is, people under normal circumstances don't become ill by using a public restroom.

**But these are not normal times.** The COVID-19 virus and pandemic spread has led massive spreading of the virus, dire health consequences, and never-before seen disruptions to every aspect of life. There are known personal habits we can use to significantly reduce our risk of exposure to COVID-19. Adapting those to children as they return to school becomes a hugely important task for all parents.

## The Basic Model of Teaching New Habits

According to Dr. Alan Kazdin's Parent Management technique, a key in teaching new behaviors to children is to practice the new behaviors many times before expecting them in real life. The first basic step is to use the ideas below at home by creating repeated pretend scenarios (Let's pretend we are walking into the school) and practicing each behavior in these "mock" environments. The goal is to have the real-life environments trigger the hygiene behaviors.

The second basic step includes the use of "modeling" or teaching the new behavior through watching the parent. Parents can ensure they teach each step of the hygiene behaviors by modeling them in sequence while having the children watch.

The final basic step is to praise children for doing each of the hygiene behaviors at the end of each practice. Praise becomes a most effective reward when it not only says "you did great" but also when the "did" part describes what's being praised. For example, "Look at how well you washed your hands and rinsed away the germs. Great job." Is much more rewarding than "Great job washing your hands." With every effective praising, the hygiene habit strengthens its power to protect the children from COVID-19.

## COVID-19 Related Hygiene Habits

**Handwashing:** The goal of handwashing is not killing germs, but instead to lift them from the skin and wash them down the drain. To do that, we use soap to make the germs slippery and lather to lift them off the skin. The rinsing then carries them down the drain. Effective handwashing takes about as long as it does to say the A-B-Cs twice. On the ccbtcolumbus YouTube channel there's a video on handwashing you can watch. Basically, you wet the hands, apply the soap, rub the soap around the palms, back of the hands, the wrists, between the fingers, and under the fingernails. Try to build a lather. Rinsing then should also flow water over each of the same areas, including under the fingernails, until all the soap and lather are gone. Children should be taught the rule to wash their hands frequently at school. Have children come to the sink and wash their hands along with the parents doing the same, quietly reciting the ABCs.

**Mask Wearing:** As obvious as it might sound, the first step is to be sure each child has a couple of masks at all times. Teach children to place the mask over the nose and pulled down at least to cover the chin. If it has a metal strip over the nose, teach the children to press it down to form-fit over the nose. Children will need to learn when to wear the mask based on school rules. If possible, having the school provide their specific mask protocols for the classrooms, hallways, lunchrooms, recess, etc. will allow parents to create practice sessions with those different locations in mind.

**Not Touching the Face:** It is always challenging to teach stopping a behavior. Children touching parts of their faces result from many different triggers: e.g., itching, dry eyes, ticklish feelings in their nose. To teach a child to inhibit a behavior, the basic approach is called habit reversal. To use that strategy, practice with the child pretending to have an urge to pick their nose, rub their eyes, etc. While trying to imagine the urge, teach them to hold back on touching their face for about 2 to 3 minutes, practicing that multiple times. At the end of each practice, praise their successes. Practicing several times over one-half hour and doing it every day for as much as 7 days should improve the chances that a child won't touch their face.

**Social Distance:** Social distancing begins with a child's ability to know what 6 feet looks like. If children haven't been taught that, take a measuring tape and create a 6-foot radius circle with the child in the middle. Walk around the child on the radius so that they observe the adult with multiple backdrops to learn the depth perception of 6 feet. Then begin to teach them violations to social distancing by crossing the circle occasionally, giving them points on a poster board, as if it were a game, when they correctly call out that the circle was crossed. Play the game for a few days, being sure to take the points they win and give them real prizes they'll enjoy. After they are able to tell the boundary fairly well, teach them a socially appropriate way to assert their need for space. Phrases like "Please step back, you're too close." Or "Excuse me while I back up a little to maintain enough distance from you." The first step is to model the phrases, then create practice sessions of them to assert while the adult occasionally comes too close. Remember to praise the child for successfully asserting themselves.

**Hand Sanitizer:** Using hand sanitizer is a make-shift alternative to handwashing. It is best to create a list of triggers that would create the need for hand sanitizer. The school may have a list of times they would like to see it used (touching doorknobs, after eating in the cafeteria, etc.). If not, create a list of surfaces that are touched by lots of children during the day, and use the practice strategies to teach the connection between touching each surface and using the sanitizer. Remember to praise children when they successfully use the hand sanitizer correctly. Whenever possible, remind children that handwashing is preferred whenever it's possible.

## Resources and Referral

If these tips are not enough based on your family's needs, ask your pediatrician for a referral to CCBT. If you need help motivating your child more or deals with inattentiveness, ask for a referral to CCBT. The behavioral health providers at CCBT can help create more detailed plans than this form, and answer questions that are more than what's discussed here.