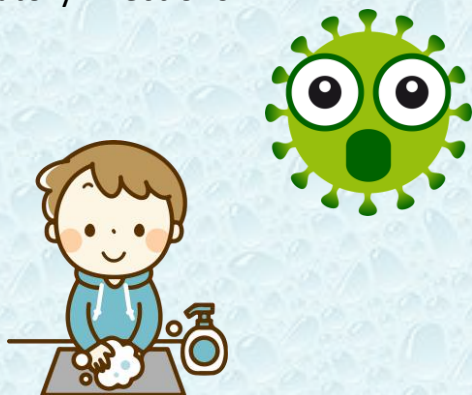


HAND WASHING HABITS AMONG PUPILS IN FOUR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ITALY: AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY IN THE pre-COVID ERA.

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Background

Hand hygiene is an easy and cost-effective type of primary prevention which could avoid up to 30% of gastro-intestinal and 40% of respiratory infections.



Although hand hygiene is a world-wide-known topic, official indications are mostly aimed at an adult target.

Nevertheless, schools are major hubs for the diffusion of infective diseases and circulation of pathogens.

Methods

An observational study was conducted in four primary schools in North-Eastern Italy.

We checked IF, HOW and WHEN (before/after playtime and lunchtime) pupils washed their hands.

The use of soap, the way they dry hands, the hand hygiene after toilet usage were also evaluated.

Pupils were not aware of the study, so to avoid the Hawthorne effect.

Results

- Overall, 622 pupils (6-11 years of age) were observed.
- The adherence to hand hygiene practice at any time of the school-day varied from 37.4% to 4.9% among schools.

- Only 44.5% of pupils who wash their hands use soap.
- Only 29.0% of pupils use the provided drying paper.
- The moment of greatest adherence to hand washing occurs before lunchtime, when 42.5% of pupils wash their hands.
- Only 33.6% of pupils wash their hands after using the toilet.
- Girls practice more the hand hygiene (51.5%) than boys.
- The youngest pupils (6-7 yrs) wash their hands more than the oldest (10-11 yrs) with 27.3% vs. 16.7%. However correct hand hygiene is more frequent among older pupils.

Conclusions

The emerging scenario points out that hand hygiene is underused and poorly practiced among primary school students.

It could be advisable and urgent to carry out tailored projects aimed at highlighting the extent to which this simple practice protects against the transmission of infectious diseases among pupils, even in European countries.

The importance of practicing hand washing among pupils should especially be stressed during current COVID-19 pandemic times.

