

TIPPING THE SCALES



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HEALTH, HYGIENE, & HIGH QUALITY

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Let's face it, it is impossible to keep our classrooms 100% germ-free. Bacteria, viruses, parasites... those microscopic organisms are certainly persistent! Although it may not be possible to completely rid ourselves of these germs, creating strong personal care routines is important for keeping children, staff, and families healthy.

The [Environment Rating Scales Institute \(ERSI\)](#) breaks down personal care routines into the following four categories: meals/snacks, diapering/toileting, health practices, and safety practices (with the exception of the SACERS-U, which does not have a standalone item dealing with diapering/toileting). This newsletter will focus on how these routines can be used as teachable moments that can impact additional items throughout the scales.

The most frequently occurring personal care routine is handwashing. It should happen upon entering the classroom, before and after use of shared wet materials (playdough, water table, etc.), after coming into contact with bodily fluids - the list goes on and on. ERSI has step-by-step guidelines for how to follow proper handwashing procedures which can be found [here](#). Health and safety guidelines to be used with the ERS are summarized directly from Caring for Our Children, the go-to national resource for health and safety standards in early childhood educational settings.

"WHEN CAN HAND SANITIZER BE USED," YOU ASK?

Whole group handwashing times can be a challenge for classrooms and can lengthen transitions and waiting times, particularly when many children are in attendance. The short answer is: hand sanitizer can be used whenever hands are not visibly soiled. When hands are not covered with sand, paint, food particles, bodily fluids, etc., use of hand sanitizer can replace the need for washing hands with soap and running water.

This could include, but is not limited to, the following situations:

- Upon arrival to the program/classroom
- When leaving and re-entering the classroom
- Before use of shared moist materials like playdough, clay, or water play
- Before mealtimes
- After coughing, sneezing, or blowing/wiping of noses (assuming that hands are not soiled with mucus/bodily fluid)

Two important things to note about hand sanitizer:

1. Soap and water is **required** after toileting/diapering procedures; use of hand sanitizer is not acceptable after these routines.
2. Age-appropriate supervision must be observed when hand sanitizer is used. Preschool and school age children will naturally require less supervision with hand sanitizer than toddlers, who are more likely to put their hands in their mouths.

Having strong handwashing procedures in place for staff and children can impact more than just personal care routine items. Many items and indicators throughout the ERS can be positively impacted by teachers during handwashing. Examples, including items that can be affected in parentheses, include:

- Counting to 20 as children scrub hands outside the flow of water (Math in daily events)
 - For more complex math-related tasks, teachers can engage older preschoolers in counting by twos, fives, or tens, as long as the counting lasts for 20 seconds (up to 40 in twos, 100 in fives, 200 in tens, etc.)
- Pointing at words and numbers and identifying the steps on a handwashing procedures poster (Understanding written numbers, Becoming familiar with print, Child-related displays).
- During handwashing wait times, teachers can sing to and/or engage children in space-appropriate movement activities (Music & movement, Transitions and waiting times, Whole group activities).

In early childhood education settings, we have an opportunity to help children develop healthy food habits that will benefit them throughout their lifetime. Between serving nutritious foods, following correct handwashing procedures, and keeping eating surfaces clean and sanitized before and after eating, teachers play an important role in promoting these healthy habits. The USDA Meal Guidelines are the national standard for serving nutritious foods to young children in the United States and are used in the ERS to determine whether foods served in a program are nutritionally adequate. You can find up-to-date USDA Meal Guidelines [here](#).

Meals are a great time to incorporate educational interactions with children. Teachers can impact a variety of items throughout the scales during mealtimes. Examples include:

- Singing songs with children (Music & movement).
- Counting how many pieces of food children have (Math in daily events; Math/number talk during mealtimes).
- Reminding children to turn off water faucets to conserve water (Nature/science).
- Pointing children's attention towards a handwashing poster and teaching them the correct steps (Child-related displays, Becoming familiar with print).

By using strategies like those listed above, teachers and children can benefit from reduced wait times, strengthened teacher-child interactions, and healthier personal care habits. Every classroom is different; personal health care routines can be affected by the amount of space available, the teaching team, the makeup of children currently enrolled, etc. While some strategies will work better than others for different classrooms, teachers can make the most of these teachable moments by implementing what works best for their own classroom.

SURFACE CLEANING PROCEDURES

Please note that the table washing procedure has been updated as of October 2025. Please see the steps below, with the most recently added step included in bold. The complete Table Washing Procedure can be found [here](#).

Step 1: Clean with soap and water to remove food waste/residue

Step 2: Rinse with potable water to remove residue from soap (a separate spray bottle filled only with potable water may be used).

Step 3: Sanitize with a food-safe, EPA-registered sanitizer used according to label instructions, OR sanitize with a bleach-water solution left to air-dry for at least two (2) minutes before wiping.**

Helpful tips:

When sanitizing tables or other meal surfaces, staff must use a separate paper towel or reusable, washable cloth for each separate step of the procedure, and for each separate surface being wiped down; the same paper towel or cloth should never be used to wipe multiple surfaces.

Please note that while meal routines require use of sanitizer, diapering/toileting surfaces require an EPA-registered disinfectant used according to label instructions, or a bleach-water solution left to air-dry for at least two minutes before wiping. You can find the complete diapering/toileting procedures [here](#).

Please remember to periodically check the [ERSI website](#) for updated resources.



PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: SUNSHINE EARLY CHILD CARE CENTER

Congratulations to Sunshine Early Child Care Center for increasing their BrightStars rating to 5 Stars! BrightStars Navigator, Melissa Hyde, has been working with this program for the past 4 years and exclaims that their commitment to the field of early childhood education, as well as to their teachers, children, and families, is clearly evident. Sunshine has enrolled many teachers in multiple cohorts of the LearnERS program. Without any materials or coaching, two of their teachers completed the self-paced LearnERS program with ERS scores over 5.0! Sunshine credits its recent successes to their teachers' creativity, many years of experience and dedication, their strong relationships, and the supportive community that Sunshine has established. Congratulations, Sunshine!

BRIGHTSTARS STAFF SPOTLIGHT: AMBER MANGIONE, CAROLYN SHIELDS, & CHELSEA LOUZON

MEET AMBER, CAROLYN, AND CHELSEA - RIAEYC'S RHODE ISLAND EARLY CHILDHOOD REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP TEAM!

Together, they bring more than 30 years of experience in Early Learning, including work as classroom educators and administrators. Through their shared passion and expertise, the team embraces collective leadership - both within their workforce team and alongside the apprentices they support. They are committed to meeting participants, partners, and one another where they are, creating a supportive and responsive apprenticeship experience that helps Early Childhood professionals advance in their careers.



Pictured from left: Chelsea Louzon, Amber Mangione, and Carolyn Shields

Q: Why did you join the early childhood field?

A: I began my career in Early Learning as a high school student in a Career and Technical Education program. Even as a teenager, I had always loved mentoring younger peers. Before that, I would play school with my stuffed animals, using the worksheets I had brought home from my teacher that day. - Amber

A: I have wanted to be a teacher since the 2nd grade. I had the most wonderful teacher who made each student feel important. Her enthusiasm and kindness have always been my inspiration. - Carolyn

A: Since I was in childcare myself, I have wanted to work with children. I would not leave for the day when I was in preschool unless I went to the infant room and said goodbye to the babies. It is absolutely incredible to watch the growth and development in these young ages. Being able to be the person to help that child grow and learn has been what I wanted to do for as long as I can remember. - Chelsea

Q: What do you find most rewarding about your work?

A: In my role as a Registered Apprenticeship Coordinator, I feel fulfilled by the opportunity to support and encourage the next generation of Early Learning professionals. After spending nearly a decade teaching in classrooms myself, I understand many of the challenges our Early Childhood workforce faces. I want our Registered Apprentices and team members to feel supported as they build their confidence, strengthen their teaching, and grow in their practice. Coaching and reflection are an important part of our program because they allow educators to pause, think about their experiences, and consider how they can continue to improve. - Amber

A: It is always the little things... The high-five after a job well done, the smile on a face after I said something witty, a child learning and repeating something that I taught them. - Carolyn

A: I love that I am now in a place where I am supporting both children's as well as teachers' growth. Being a coach in the registered apprenticeship, I am able to help these teachers grow and develop alongside the children in their classroom. You can see their confidence increase just like the little ones. - Chelsea

Rhode Island's Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeship Program supports educators as they build their skills, earn credentials, and advance in their careers while continuing to work in Early Learning programs. Through an 'earn-while-you-learn' model, apprentices receive paid, hands-on experience in the classroom along with professional development, related instruction, mentoring, and individualized coaching.

The program offers three pathways to meet the needs of educators at different points in their careers. Pathways include:

- The Preschool CDA Pathway helps preschool educators work toward their Child Development Associate, or CDA, credential.
- The Infant/Toddler CDA Pathway supports educators who work with infants and toddlers. This pathway also includes the Infant/Toddler CDA credential.
- The Birth-3 Pathway is designed for infant and toddler teachers. It offers 16 college credits focused on children from birth through age 3.



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