

Have You Washed Your Hands Yet?

Have you brushed your teeth? O my... look at those long nails! Let's cut them. Take off your shoes at the door please. Time for bath. Wipe your nose....

We hear ourselves saying sentences like these many times in the course of a normal day. Cleanliness is a big concern for all parents. We want the children, themselves, to adopt and carry out the daily routines of cleaning their body as soon as possible but, it seems to take forever to achieve this. Often, we warn the children about germs, and how they will get sick if they do not wash their hands and body, or how they would get into trouble with Mom if they make the floor dirty. What we might neglect to emphasize is that cleanliness is a virtue and, as other virtues, when we practice it, we feel good not only on the outside but in the inside. It helps us become a better human being. To achieve this, when your toddler finishes taking a bath or when your five year old helps you clean the kitchen counter, or when your teenager finally cleans up her room, take the time to savor with them how cleanliness feels and how it gives us a good feeling to be clean and to have a clean environment. This approach of identifying the virtue of cleanliness helps the child connect all these desired *actions* as different efforts towards the same goal. When he takes the initiative to wash his own hands before eating, washes the dishes, or takes extra care not to spill his food on the floor, he is getting better and better at keeping himself and his home clean.

Try not to nag or shame the child about the dirt or the mess. As we have all experienced in our childhood, sentences like "Is this a room or a pig sty?", "Why can't you ever keep your clothes clean?" or "You stink like a cow." do not motivate one to clean up because one feels cleanliness is a good thing to do. Instead, they build resentment, hurt and finally result in desensitization. If you need something cleaned, simply call the children to practice cleanliness. If cleanliness has become an issue in your home, then set clear rules for your family regarding cleanliness and consistently enforce the rules. For example, the children can only leave for school if they have completed all their morning cleanliness routines. Yes, it might cause them to be late to school for a couple of days, but very soon they would learn that they cannot get away with it. Or, a favorite activity like reading a bed time story will only take place if the child has completed all his nightly cleaning routines. If we are consistent in our rules, cleanliness activities do not turn into power struggles and the home atmosphere will be more peaceful and joyful. The rules stand and consequences apply when they are not obeyed.

From very young, help the children understand that while cleaning our bodies and our home is very important to our physical and psychological health, it is only *part* of our responsibility. All of us need to also put effort into keeping our environment clean for ourselves and others. When cleanliness is a challenge in our surrounding and garbage may be scattered everywhere, children might also follow the crowd to litter or become very critical of others who do. Both of these approaches are harmful to the society and have negative long term effects. Parents can change this by setting model of compassion for people and responsibility for the environment. They can encourage the children to persevere in practicing cleanliness and to help educate others about its importance.

When we talk about the virtues of cleanliness with children from young and encourage their efforts to practice it, we help them realize its value for themselves and those around them. In this way, they gradually take cleanliness as their own responsibility. It becomes something they take pleasure in and willingly choose to do.

If the inner desire for cleanliness is cultivated in childhood, as children grow, the meaning of the virtue can be expanded beyond its apparent aspects. We can talk to an eight or ten year old about cleaning up mistakes and taking responsibility to repair harms they may have caused to others. Talking to a 12 year old about the importance of keeping our body clean of harmful substances will help prepare him for when he will be asked to drink alcohol or take harmful drugs in his teens. Finally, we can discuss with our pre-teen about cleanliness of thoughts and purity of motives as they enter the turbulent years of adolescence.

So, next time you get frustrated about asking your child to wash his hands before meal for the hundredth time, try to remember, it is all part of the bigger picture, *the virtue of cleanliness*. The good feeling we create about practicing this virtue will likely come to our help later in the difficult teen years. So, practice your patience.

Shiva Yan
The Children's Virtues Development Project