

A germ-spreader in hand, is worth 3.5 million lives

Lifebuoy helps Sri Lanka's children use hand washing to fight against the world's largest preventable fatal disease

Unilever Sri Lanka's largest health brand, Lifebuoy, has been at the forefront of many country-wide hygiene promotion programs, and their most recent achievement, Global Handwashing Day, has put Sri Lanka on the pathway to saving the lives of the most precious members of our society – our children.

Lifebuoy was the co-founder in Sri Lanka of the first ever Global Handwashing Day, which was commemorated on October 15th spearheading the largest community service effort ever seen. The campaign, organized in collaboration with the Health Education Bureau & Ministry of Healthcare & Nutrition along with the Global Public Private Partnership for Handwashing (PPPHW) saw one million children and 1500 schools in Sri Lanka join 20 countries worldwide in promoting what is now regarded as the simplest and yet least practiced life-saving habit – washing hands.

Hasha Hisham, Assistant Brand Manager for Lifebuoy at Unilever Sri Lanka says, '*Lifebuoy has for over a century promised households a life without fear and it's time parents are able to let their little ones enjoy the fun of childhood without the fear of falling prey to two of the largest child killers – diarrhoea and acute respiratory infection – both of which are caused by poor handwashing habits and claim the lives of over 3.5 million children worldwide per year.*'

Both these diseases are transmitted by pathogens in human faeces. There are around 100,000,000,000 viruses and 10,000,000 bacteria in a person's faeces and in fact one gram of faeces can contain up to one thousand parasite cysts and a hundred worm eggs. When children ingest these pathogens they are prone to various illnesses, such as diarrhoea, pneumonia, cholera and dysentery. UN studies have revealed that up to 160 classrooms of children die from diarrhoea every day, which amounts to a mortality rate of approximately one child per 15 seconds!

On Global Handwashing Day, Lifebuoy reined in a team of hygiene experts consisting of 1500 Public health institute officials and the Unilever Mehewara volunteer group to create awareness among one million children on the importance of handwashing in stopping the transmission of diseases. Starting at Uggalboda Maha Vidyalaya in Kalutara, the team visited over 1500 schools across the country, making this Unilever's biggest community service project to date.

'Schools are one of the most influential and accessible environments for habit-building and behaviour change among children. Children spend up to 8 hours of their day and 8 months of their year in schools and the remainder of the time involves interaction with school peers. That's why we thought targeting schools on the importance of handwashing will literally drive home the hygiene message, in that once the handwashing habit is inculcated in school, children are more likely to practice it even in their homes,' said Nilantha swaris, Activation Manager for Lifebuoy Unilever Sri Lanka.

The campaign included rallies, events and educational programs to not only encourage handwashing but also introduce the fun side of this hygienic habit. "Given that most children are eager to run out of the toilets, especially given the limited time they are given to play with their friends during school hours, Lifebuoy had to make handwashing after using the toilet not seem like detracting but contributing to the fun they have in school. We also had to show them that by spending a few minutes washing their hands, they won't catch the kind of diseases that can in the long run result in them missing out on play time," said Hasha Hisham.

The team also demonstrated effective ways of washing hands through a school bus equipped with Lifebuoy antibacterial soaps and fun handwashing activities, which visited schools and neighbourhoods. The bus focused on the message that visibly clean hands are not necessarily hygienically clean, contrary to what most adults believe. Hands are covered with millions of microbes and bacteria that are invisible and that can't be removed by water alone. School children were advised to not only use effective antibacterial soaps like Lifebuoy during handwashing but also ensure that their hands are covered with lather before rinsing. This type of handwashing will rid a child's hands of a majority of the bacteria that would otherwise be ingested during meal time.

According to the UN, the diarrhoea that is caused by ingesting harmful bacteria has resulted in children missing up to 272 million school days in a year, drastically bringing down their learning potential. Prior to the Global Handwashing campaign, Lifebuoy launched what was called the Germ Fighter Activation program which was dedicated to combating such poor attendance records and helping Sri Lankan students stay in school by staying healthy. The program which encouraged children to be germ fighters rather than germ spreaders, has already helped over half a million students to stay healthy and so far in 2008 has raised hygiene awareness among a further 200,000 school-going children.

'Hands are the body's cleaners and feeders, but poor hygiene can make them diabolical disease-spreaders – hands are supposed to be an integral part of our survival, but a visit to the toilet can convert them instantly to an integral part of our poor health. That's why Unilever Sri Lanka has for decades now relentlessly championed handwashing among children and families in the country, through our most trusted health brand, Lifebuoy. We have invested in countless community service projects and campaigns over the years to inculcate good hygiene habits in the Sri Lankan public. Global Handwashing Day is a testimony to the continuation of that commitment to keep the Sri Lankan public healthy and particularly to help save the lives of our children against preventable fatal diseases like diarrhoea.' Charmila Hettiarachchi, Head of Corporate Communications at Unilever Sri Lanka said.

The inaugural Global Handwashing Day was part of the promotion of improved hygiene practices across the world, which is in keeping with the U.N. declaration that this year is the International Year of Sanitation. The coalition behind Global Handwashing Day is the Public-Private Partnership for Handwashing, which is an international initiative that invites the private sector to pool their resources and expertise with NGO's and government institutions, in order to better promote handwashing with soap as an effective combatant against diarrhoea in developing countries. With diarrhoea being one of the foremost contributors to child mortality, efforts such as these are expected to steer the global standard of health to the Millennium Development Goal of reducing by two thirds by the year 2015 the number of deaths among children below the age of five.