



Curious toddlers are walking germ magnets.

# Freaked Out by Germs?

Some parents get so obsessive, they have trouble letting their kids be kids. We've got practical tips on how to do just that—and still cut the risk of getting sick.

BY KIM RATCLIFF

**M**y son Saxon recently had a friend over who hacked, sneezed, and coughed his way through their playdate. After his pal left, I dumped the enormous basket of Legos the boys had been playing with into the tub and scrubbed every last block in hopes that Saxon wouldn't get sick. The Bionicle bubble bath took close to an hour, but at least I could sleep that night. Was I over-the-top in my cleaning frenzy? Little bit.

Although experts agree that teaching your children healthy habits can help

keep sickness at bay, parents often go too far. "Germs are everywhere, and we can't, and shouldn't, try to keep our kids completely germ-free," says *Parents* advisor Harley A. Rotbart, M.D., vice chairman of pediatrics at Children's Hospital Colorado, in Aurora, and the University of Colorado School of Medicine, in Denver. "But commonsense approaches can help us cut our kids' annual sick days in half and keep families healthier." We visited six germ-y family hot spots and determined the best way to stay healthy.

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## PUBLIC RESTROOMS

**YOU'RE A GERMAPHOBE IF** You regularly beg your child to “just hold it” so you can avoid having her use a communal commode.

**THE DIRT** Studies show that toilet flushers, door handles, and locks can be the most infectious parts of a public restroom because people haven't washed their hands before leaving the stall. Similarly, faucets can also contain traces of fecal bacteria. If your child puts her hand in her mouth after touching anything that's been contaminated with *E. coli*, she could end up with a stomach bug.

**STAY-HEALTHY STRATEGY** Use your togetherness in the stall as a teaching moment, advises Will Sawyer, M.D., a family physician in Cincinnati and founder of the Henry the Hand Foundation, which promotes hand hygiene. “Start by encouraging your child not to flush with her hands,” says Dr. Sawyer. You can teach her to cover the toilet handle with a piece of toilet paper or, if she's tall and coordinated enough, to flush using her foot. Demonstrate how to lock and unlock the stall door with your elbow or a piece of toilet paper. Before you wash up, grab a paper towel so that you don't touch a dirty dispenser afterward. Also use a paper towel to open the bathroom door when you're leaving, to limit contact with germs left behind by those who don't wash their hands, which is one out of every three people, estimates the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

## COMMUNITY POOL

**YOU'RE A GERMAPHOBE IF** The mercury soars and you'd rather hose your children down in the backyard than deal with the skeezy public swimming pool and showers. Who knows what nastiness is seeping out of those soggy swim diapers?

**THE DIRT** You share the water—and the germs in it—with every person who enters the pool. A single incidence of diarrhea could contaminate water throughout a large pool system or water park, says the CDC.



Teach her to wash for as long as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice.

# Hand-Washing 101

Another mom, who saw my son washing up on a playdate, raved about how he'd scrubbed in like a surgeon, and I beamed with pride. Washing hands is big in our house. So if his pals ever do a halfhearted job—putting soap on dry hands and splashing their grimy mitts under the sink for a nanosec or two—I body-block them at the bathroom door and teach them Hand-Washing 101. In this case my obsession is spot-on: It's widely accepted that 80 percent of infectious diseases are spread through touch, which is why hand-washing is the absolute best way to stay healthy. Follow these tips.

- 1 | Make it a habit.** As soon as your child walks in the door from anywhere, and especially before eating, ask her to head straight to the bathroom to wash up. Help her understand that bacteria are invisible so even though our hands don't look dirty, they very well still might be.
- 2 | Wash well.** Soap up wrists and back of hands as well as between fingers and under nails for at least 20 seconds. Soap helps to remove germs but doesn't kill them; there's little proof that antibacterial versions are more effective. Germs love wet surfaces, so always dry hands thoroughly.
- 3 | Supervise young children.** Stand over little ones as often as you can until they learn to wash their hands properly, suggests Owen Hendley, M.D., professor of pediatrics and infectious disease at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, in Charlottesville.

**STAY-HEALTHY STRATEGY** Your brood can still take the plunge. For the most part, continuous filtration and disinfection of water reduces the risk of spreading illness at public swimming facilities. Still, chlorine doesn't kill all germs and takes its sweet time in killing certain ones. That's why it's important to discourage kids from swallowing pool water or squirting it from their mouth. You should also avoid the pool if your children have diarrhea (this is especially true for kids wearing swim diapers). Make a point of taking frequent potty breaks—waiting to hear “I have to go!” may mean it's too late. Who wants to be on the receiving end of the other moms' evil glares while they wait for the lifeguards to clean the pool?

## THE BASEBALL OR SOCCER FIELD

**YOU'RE A GERMAPHOBE IF** You're contemplating signing your son up for

## One out of every three people leaves a public bathroom without washing his hands, estimates the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

chess club instead because watching him high-five the dirty paws of the opposing team is more than you can bear.

**THE DIRT** When your child touches other kids after the game and then slurps on an orange wedge, he deposits not only his own germs but those of his teammates and opponents directly into his mouth. “Hand-to-hand contact is the number-one way viruses are spread,” says Dr. Rotbart, author of *Germ Proof Your Kids*. If your child shakes hands with someone who has a virus and puts his infected fingertips into his eyes, nose, or mouth—boom!—he's got a one-way ticket to Funkytown.

**STAY-HEALTHY STRATEGY** “When you can't get to soap and water, alcohol-based hand sanitizer is an effective alternative,” says Dr. Rotbart. Stand at the end of the congratulations line and give your kid a nickel-size squirt of alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and hey, why not share with the whole team? You might feel a bit neurotic, but there really aren't any better (or more subtle) options. Remind your child to distribute the gel onto his palms and work it between his fingers. When your athlete gets older, stash a bottle in his sports bag. (In the meantime, push for congratulatory fist bumping. After all, we rarely

touch our eyes, nose, or mouth with the back of our hands.)

## YOUR HOUSE

**YOU'RE A GERMAPHOBE IF** Your daughter comes down with a stomach virus and your strategy is to send the sibs to Grandma's, leave the sick child's meals by the door, and read *Goodnight Moon* to her via speakerphone from another room.

**THE DIRT** When one family member gets sick, the rest of you don't have to go down. With due diligence, you can still give your child some TLC (in person) and prevent everyone else from getting infected.

### STAY-HEALTHY STRATEGY

Disinfecting frequently touched surfaces with wipes and using alcohol-based hand sanitizers can significantly reduce the spread of gastroenteritis at home and at school, according to a study by researchers at Children's Hospital Boston. To avoid transmitting viruses to other family members, take this advice from Dr. Rotbart: "Stash a bottle by the door of your sick child's room to use when leaving. Disinfect any frequently touched surfaces or objects, such as crib rails, dresser-drawer handles, hard plastic toys, doorknobs, and light switches. As a temporary measure, use paper towels in the bathroom and kitchen instead of hand towels. And don't allow your children to share drinking glasses, water bottles, or toothbrushes."

## THE PLAYGROUND

**YOU'RE A GERMAPHOBE IF** You arrive at the park in a hazmat suit to disinfect the jungle gym and scoop out any undesirables from the sandbox.

**THE DIRT** Just because your kid will probably dangle from the same monkey bars that a sick child touched at some point doesn't mean you have to deprive him of his social hour. Viruses, like those spread when kids sneeze and cough, can live on outdoor equipment anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of days. But for the most part they usually aren't cause for concern. Your child

would have to touch the precise spot where another child had left her germs moments earlier and then immediately touch his eyes, mouth, or nose to become infected.

More encouraging news: Although squirrels, cats, and other critters have been known to do their business in sandboxes, related cases of gastrointestinal-related illnesses are few and far between, says Dr. Sawyer.

**STAY-HEALTHY STRATEGY** Don't allow children to eat or drink anything while in a sandbox or before washing their hands after playing in a sandbox. If soap and water aren't available, be sure to clean your child's hands thoroughly with baby wipes before she eats in order to get rid of dirt, sand, and possible animal waste. (This is one instance where hand sanitizer won't do the trick; the alcohol can't remove those offending particles.) And don't forget to cover the sandbox at home.

## GROCERY STORE

**YOU'RE A GERMAPHOBE IF** You plan to keep using shopping-cart covers until your kid is 10 years old.

**THE DIRT** Grocery-cart handles are far germier than most anything else, according to Charles Gerba, Ph.D. (aka Dr. Germ), professor of environmental microbiology at the University of Arizona in Tucson. In addition to bacteria from hands, raw meat juices and pesticide residue can end up there too.

**STAY-HEALTHY STRATEGY** That shopping-cart cover is perfect for a baby or toddler—just don't forget to wash it regularly or else you're defeating its purpose. When you don't use a cover, disinfectant wipes, which are being offered more frequently at the front of many grocery stores, have been proven to kill germs and bacteria left behind. Bring your own, if need be, so that you can wipe down handles or even hands after anyone's touched packages of meat or poultry. And of course, when it's age-appropriate, teach your child not to put things in her mouth. □