



by Karen Stephens

Parents Can Help Kids Stay One Step Ahead of Germs

Though typically born into smaller families, the social world of today's children expands quickly. As early as six weeks of age, many children are part of child care centers or family child care homes. Our young also attend group programs sponsored by children's discovery museums and the like. Add in trips to the mall, fast food restaurants, or other people-intensive environments, and it means kids are exposed to a wide variety of germs. You know, those nasty little things that can raise havoc with children's health, parent's work attendance, and family life in general.

In the home and beyond, there's a plethora of wiggly-jiggley organisms doing their best to thrive and survive among us — bacteria, virus, parasite, flu bug, or a plain old cold germ. Some are helpful; some are not. Children's bodies are in the earliest phases of building up natural immunities, so they're especially vulnerable to illness causing germs.

Children's typical behavior gives germs more than a helping hand, too. Little ones are forever touching everything, germ-laden or not, and then putting their hands into their mouths or noses. The result is that children end up having, on average, up to 12 colds or flu episodes a year. That's a lot more than the average of two cases per year for adults.

An obvious goal of every home, child care center, and school is to keep kids healthy. To do that, all of us must become partners in preventing kids' exposure and susceptibility to illness. With a team approach, we can help limit the spread of contagious illness among children as well as adults. That spells good news for everyone. Prevention is fundamental to managing children's illness. Controlling kids' exposure to germs is the first fundamental step. Follow these tips conscientiously and your kids will be healthier now and in the future.

Build resistance to illness.

Regular and adequate sleep helps the body maintain energy to fend off germs. Rest also helps the body repair itself after germ attack; that helps prevent illness from becoming severe or chronic.

Routine exercise, indoors and out, keeps the body's system in good working order. Moist breathing passages help repel germs, but dry indoor furnace air dries out breathing passages. That's why, when properly dressed for the weather, outdoor winter air is especially good for kids. Outdoors there's also less concentration of germs than inside.

Good nutrition gives the body's cells the building blocks for ongoing health. Healthy cells fend off germs; poorly nourished cells are at greater risk of invasion. When poorly nourished, children's damaged tissues take longer to repair to restore health.

Every body needs plenty of fluids throughout the day. When well hydrated, blood carries germ-fighting cells more efficiently and effectively, and breathing passages are protected with a layer of moisture. Serve kids plenty of water and 100% juices.

Teach effective hand washing.

Help children become responsible partners in maintaining their own health. They contribute to everyone's wellness by preventing the spread of illness. A good way to start is to read them the entertaining book, *Those Mean Nasty Dirty Downright*

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Disgusting but ... Invisible Germs by Judith Rice. After reading the book kids will be motivated to learn the best health prevention procedure around — diligent hand washing. No kidding, it's the easiest, most effective, and even the cheapest way to get rid of germs that cause illness. (For children kindergarten to grade 3, the book *Germs Make Me Sick!* is also a good introduction to fending off germs.)

Kids (and you) should wash hands before and after eating, before and after diapering, after toileting, coughing or sneezing and using a tissue, before and after cooking with an adult, after playing outside, and any other time hands are heavily exposed to dirt or germs.

Just dipping hands in water doesn't do the health prevention trick! Here's how kids must learn to wash hands: Wet hands under running water, lather with mild liquid soap (cakes of soap harbor germs), thoroughly rub soapy fingers and hands for about 20 seconds, rinse germs and soapy water down the drain, dry hands, and use a paper towel to turn off water because faucets harbor germs. (Hint, to help kids wash long enough, sing a song like the "ABC" song or "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" while washing.)

Frequent hand washing can cause skin to chap more easily. Those small breaks in the skin pave another way for germs to invade. After hand washing, teach children to use a bit of hand lotion as a moisturizing barrier.

Reduce exposure to germs at home and child care.

When entering a group, ensure your child arrives with clean hands, nose, face and, if applicable, diaper. Your child's setting should follow stringent and consistent cleaning and sanitation practices. Look at the environment from your child's point of view. Is a tissue easy to find and reach? Are sinks convenient for children? Are liquid soap and paper towels right nearby? Does an adult remind children to wash hands after sneezing, blowing their noses, toileting, soiling hands, and before eating? Are food preparation areas and eating surfaces cleaned and sanitized to ensure healthy meal service? Does the environment have a genuine fresh smell and clean appearance, rather than an overwhelming covered up smell that occurs when pine-scented sanitizer is merely poured or mopped over a dirty surface?

Don't send ill children to a group setting.

Become familiar with contagious illness that prevents a child's attendance at child care or school. Programs have a list of such illnesses in their parent handbook. When children become ill, provide adequate time for their full recovery, otherwise illness returns and spreads more easily. Ill children feel safest and most comforted when at home with a parent, so utilize your company's sick leave and family leave policies. If you face times when staying at home with your child isn't an option, here are ideas to pursue.

- Plan ahead. Seek out a trusted relative, neighbor, or friend to be on call to care for your child when you can't.
- Network with other child care or school parents so you can barter sick day child care services.
- Inquire about back up or ill child care programs in your area. Such programs might be operated by a social service agency or even a nanny agency. A child care resource and referral program can help you locate one in your area.

Children's Books

- *Those Mean Nasty Dirty Downright Disgusting but...Invisible Germs* by Judith Rice (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 1997).
- *Germs Make Me Sick!* by Melvin Berger (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).
- *Germs On Their Fingers!* by Wendy Wakefield Ferrin (Knoxville, TN: The Wakefield Connection, 2002).
- *Wash Your Hands!* by Tony Ross (La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 2000).
- *Germs! Germs! Germs!* by Bobbi Katz (Minneapolis, MN: Econo-Clad Books, 1996).
- *Healthy Me: Fun ways to develop good health & safety habits. Activities for kids 5-8* by Michelle O'Brien-Palmer (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1999).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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