

Terminate the Germs!

Suggestions for Infection Control with Young Children

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Let's face it; young children are carriers of sickness. From the common cold to influenza, if it's infectious, children carry it! How do children come into contact with all those nasty germs?

Well, children are naturally curious. They pick up and examine anything that looks interesting wherever they are. Also, unless taught and monitored, young children generally do not wash their hands often or cover their mouths when they sneeze and cough. Children also like to touch adults and other children, picking up and passing germs with each touch.

Children will be children, but as adults, it is our responsibility to make sure that infection is not easily spread! Many states and agencies have a certain set of infection control procedures; the following are just guidelines to help you keep your work area germ free.

How do I know it's really clean?

It may look clean and smell clean, but if not sanitized properly it's not germ free. So, how do I clean all my materials and how often do I have to do it?

- **Smooth plastic toys** - This material is the easiest to clean. Look around and notice all the plastic toys you have in your supplies. Most likely you have balls, farm sets, bubbles, cars, just to name a few! Items that are submersible (plastic items that have no electronic components) clean easily with a solution of bleach and hot water. Follow the directions on the bottle to disinfect and submerge the toys in this solution. Allow the toys to soak for some time (at least 15 minutes) and remove from the solution. Allow to dry completely before storage. Be sure not to get this solution on your clothes, rugs, or any fabrics because it will bleach them. When the toys are dry, spray lightly with a disinfectant spray like Lysol® to kill any remaining germs. Clean the toys in the bleach and water solution at least once a week, but spray toys with a disinfectant spray after every use.
- **Foam toys** - Some foam toys are water soluble, which can't be cleaned by total submersion in the water-bleach solution. Use antibacterial wipes in combination with a disinfectant spray after each use.
- **Electronic toys** - Electronic toys (like pianos, cars, etc.) cannot be placed in water. Carefully wipe off all surfaces with an antibacterial wipe, paying close attention to where the children actually come into contact with the toy. Let dry and spray with a disinfectant spray. To avoid damaging the toys, avoid spraying around the battery casing, lights, or any moving parts.
- **Wooden toys** - Cleaning wooden toys treated with paint or shellac is easy. Untreated wood is a porous surface and will hold water and germs. Wipe treated wooden toys (including puzzles) with an antibacterial wipe and spray with disinfectant. Unfinished wooden toys are not the best toys for young children due to difficulty cleaning and possible injury (splinters).

- **Cloth toys** - Cloth toys are hardest to clean because of their porous nature. The only way to truly sanitize them is to wash them in hot water with a solution of bleach and detergent. Make sure to rinse and dry them thoroughly to inhibit mold growth. You can also spray them with a disinfectant spray after each use. Over time, however, your toys will start to look worn, so replace cloth toys frequently.
- **Books** - Books are difficult to clean because they damage easily. Using a damp cloth or anti-bacterial wipe to clean the pages is the best option. A lot of children's books are cardboard coated with plastic, so these tend to clean easier than soft pages. Don't submerge books in water.

Often, germ transmission comes from hand-to-hand contact. Washing hands thoroughly after contact decreases risk of passing bacteria on to other people or surfaces. It is recommended that you use soap and warm water, paying close attention to the area between fingers and fingernails. Wash with soap for at least thirty seconds. (I once heard to sing a verse of "Yankee Doodle Dandy.") Rinse hands with warm water and dry thoroughly. Try not to touch surfaces after washing your hands, including door handles, faucets, and paper towel handles or you risk picking up more bacteria. Encourage young children to wash their hands often while singing a song. They know their hands are clean when the song is over.

Medical professionals recommend using antibacterial hand gel only when soap and water is unavailable or in conjunction with soap and water. Sometimes the anti-bacterial gels will only kill the weakest of the bacteria, allowing transmission of stronger strains. If soap and hot water are not accessible, use anti-bacterial hand gel until you can get to a sink.

Keeping your toys, supplies, and hands clean is only part of the battle. Practice common sense when working with younger children. If a child looks sick, feels warm, and has any noticeable signs and symptoms of infection (mucous in nose, coughing, vomiting, diarrhea, etc.), notify his/her guardian and remove him/her from contact with others. Practicing good sanitary habits will help us beat this year's cold and flu season!



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