

[< Back](#)

Parents com

Hygiene Basics for Kids

By Felicia Megginson

A clean kid is a healthier kid, which is why you need to teach your child the basics of proper hygiene.

Clean Means Healthy

Kids call them cooties, but you know them as germs, and they're all around us. They're floating freely through the air and have taken up residence on your child's favorite toys. They're on the video game console, they're waiting for you on the bathroom doorknob, and they're definitely lurking in those smelly sneakers your son refuses to give up.

While kids place their faith in that old standby, the trusty cootie shot (often administered by a best buddy on the playground), parents tend to take a more practical approach. You vigilantly spray every room with disinfectant, constantly wipe down surfaces with bleach towelettes, and buy antibacterial soaps and hand sanitizers, hoping to kill germs and prevent illness. And while these are all good and noble efforts, the best way to help your child remain cootie-free is to teach the importance of proper personal hygiene.

Clean and Healthy

When your child was a baby, you loved the sweet smell of baby sweat. You couldn't resist those sticky hands or that messy, food-encrusted face. Bath time was a joy -- it was a time when you and your baby could play and bond

However, your child is a bit older now, and the grimy hands and messy face have lost their adorable appeal. That once-sweet sweat has become a wee bit sour and stinky, and bath time has become a war of wills (it seems your child has developed an aversion to water and now prefers to remain gleefully dirty, rather than soak in the suds).

Good hygiene isn't just about keeping your child presentable, but an active means of preventing the spread of illnesses. It's as simple as this: A clean child is a healthy child. Proper hygiene is vital for school-age kids because most illnesses are contracted in school where little noses, mouths, and hands spread germs. When taught early on, proper hygiene can lead to a lifetime of cleanliness and good health. And as your child approaches puberty, the need to maintain good hygiene will become more obvious, when hormonal changes lead to stronger body odor and oilier skin and hair. Don't wait until then to teach the importance of proper hygiene. Start today with these basic strategies to help your child stay clean and healthy.

The Hands Have It

When it comes to germs, nothing spreads them faster than our two

hands. Emphasize the importance of hand washing for everyone in the family -- particularly for your kids who think nothing of sneezing into their hands, then reaching into the cookie jar.

Hands should be washed:

- Before every meal or snack
- Before and after handling or preparing food
- Before caring for a toddler or infant
- After coming in from outside
- After using the bathroom
- After playing with the family pet
- After changing the cat litter or cleaning a pet cage
- After sneezing or blowing the nose (when possible)
- After taking out the trash

It's All About Technique

Forget the hand sanitizers or those antibacterial soaps for beating germs (you don't want to kill all germs; some are beneficial and necessary for maintaining a healthy immune system). A good old-fashioned hand washing with plain soap and warm water will do the trick. Hands should be thoroughly lathered, rubbed, and rinsed for at least 15 seconds (one verse of the "Happy Birthday" song is a good measure), then thoroughly dried on a clean, dry towel. Paper towels are your best bet, so install a roll in the bathroom today.

Also teach your child to keep his hands out of his mouth and nose. Nail biting and nose picking are not only unsightly, they're also very unsanitary.

Splish, Splash Taking a Bath

The Saturday night bath was a common thing back in our grandparents' day when indoor plumbing was something of a luxury and daily hygiene habits were a bit different. Now most homes have modern plumbing and daily showers or nightly baths are commonplace.

However, merely having indoor plumbing doesn't mean your kids will want to bathe! Many kids hate taking baths for various reasons -- fear of water, sensitive skin, an interruption to their play, etc. But daily bathing is essential for keeping the body clean and germ-free. Kids are more likely to enjoy bath time if it's fun, so buy kid-centric soaps, have lots of tub toys on hand, and use the time to talk with your child.

Kids like routines (even when they protest), so it's up to you to establish a daily bathing schedule. Options to consider:

- A bath or shower before bedtime
- A bath or shower before school

- Face and hand washing before dinner
- Wash basin bathing, i.e., cleaning the face, armpits, and genitals with a soap and water between bath or shower times

During bath time, kids should be shown how to:

- Wash their face
- Wash their hair
- Wash their armpits
- Wash their feet
- Clean beneath and clip fingernails and toenails (you may want to do this for younger children)
- Clean their ears (this should entail cleaning only the exterior parts of the ear --including behind the ears where oil and dirt accumulate -- with a washcloth)
- Clean their genital area and bottom (uncircumcised boys should be shown the proper way to keep the foreskin area clean)

Caring for an uncircumcised penis

Hair Affair

Right up there with an aversion to water is the aversion to a comb and brush. Many kids learn to hate having their hair brushed or washed as toddlers, and some do not outgrow it. Daily brushing removes dead hair and skin cells, and distributes oil from the scalp down the hair shaft. Regular daily brushing also keeps hair from getting unruly and tangled.

Culturally, Americans tend to be obsessed with daily hair washing. However, this is excessive and unnecessary for most children. Washing a child's hair too often can lead to dryness, itchy scalp, and hair loss (overwashing strips natural, protective oils from the hair). By teaching your child to brush her hair daily, you will not need to wash it more than once a week.

When you shampoo your child's hair, use mild products that are made specifically for kids. Many products contain detangling agents to help keep the hair shaft smooth, which makes combing and brushing afterward much more tolerable. Kids with extremely curly hair need extra conditioning to prevent breakage. Light oils, like coconut or sweet almond oil, can be applied to dry, extra curly hair once or twice a week to keep it under control. Active kids who are outdoors or who sweat a lot may need to wash their hair more frequently. This is particularly true for kids nearing puberty, when hair has a tendency to be oilier and attract more dirt.

Finally, haircuts and trimming should be done on a regular basis, say every four to six weeks, to help prevent split ends. Even girls with longer hair should have the ends trimmed regularly.

The Facts About Head Lice

Contrary to popular belief, head lice are not caused by poor hygiene. Head lice are spread when kids share things like brushes, combs, and hats. Typical outbreaks of head lice occur in school and at summer camp where these items tend to be shared.

Discourage your kids from sharing combs, brushes, barrettes, headbands, and hats with their friends, and make sure you wash favorite hats as often as you can. Combs and brushes should also be washed in warm soapy water regularly.

Make a point to check your child's head for head lice, which appear as white nits attached to the hair shaft. They may look like dandruff, but they can't be removed by combing or brushing. If you suspect your child has head lice, check in with your pediatrician or local pharmacist, who can recommend over-the-counter treatment options.

[More FAQs on head lice](#)

[Dr. Greene on Head Lice](#)

Bright Smiles

Cavities aren't as common as they used to be, thanks in part to fluoridated water and calcium-rich diets. Another way to safeguard against tooth decay is to encourage daily brushing.

Toddlers and small children should have their teeth brushed by parents at least once a day. When kids are older (say 5 or 6), they should be brushing their teeth on their own. The American Dental Association (ADA) recommends brushing at least twice a day with a soft bristle brush that has a head small enough to reach back teeth, where cavities often start. Older kids should also be shown how to properly floss their teeth.

As a final note, be sure to show your child proper brushing techniques, including how to brush his tongue. Halitosis isn't uncommon in kids, and is usually due to poor brushing habits. The ADA doesn't recommend the use of mouthwash in kids under age 12, unless prescribed by a dentist.

Smelling Sweet

Kids do not really develop strong body odor until they reach puberty, when hormonal changes cause sweat to become a bit pungent (to say the least). Smelly feet in young children are usually due to musty shoes. Your child should always wear socks with any closed shoes. Without a regular flow of air to keep feet dry, bacteria and fungus can live and grow in the porous, padded insoles. Remember to air shoes out, especially if they've gotten wet. And you can invest in removable insoles, which can be washed regularly to help reduce foot odor.

Cotton socks are ideal for keeping feet dry and cool. Kids should be encouraged to change their socks daily, especially if they are active. Foot powder sprinkled into shoes and socks is another means for keeping feet smelling sweet, and a way to avoid athlete's foot and similar fungi. Additionally, kids should be discouraged from going barefoot outdoors or in a house with pets that spend a great deal of time outside (in addition to tracking in dirt, indoor/outdoor pets also track in fungus and bacteria that live in the soil). Slippers are a good option indoors, and flip-flops outdoors.

Body odor in small children usually isn't coming from them but from

their clothes. Sweat, dirt, dead skin cells, and food become embedded in clothes. The stink comes from bacteria that grow in the soiled clothes. Underclothing can be pretty smelly, especially during summer months, so you should encourage your child to wear clean underwear every day. Clean underwear may make perfect sense to you, but not to your 5-year-old who loves that pair of Powerpuff Girls panties that Grandma got her for her birthday. Keep several pairs of favorites on hand to avoid hygiene conflicts.

Finally, help kids stay dry and comfortable by teaching them to use baking-soda-based powders. A bit sprinkled under the arms and applied to the genital region and bottom will help your child stay cool and dry. It can also protect against chafing and rashes caused by excess moisture. Children who have not reached puberty don't really need to use deodorants or antiperspirants, but you may want to familiarize kids with these things as they get closer to puberty. Be mindful of powders, deodorants, and other toiletry products that are scented. Children with allergies may be irritated by using these products.

© Copyright 2009 Meredith Corporation. All Rights Reserved.