Using hand sanitizers

Are we too clean for our own good?

Let kids be kids—a little dirt is okay

Your immune system protects your body from potentially dangerous invaders. Allergic reactions are a type of immune response and are determined by the interaction of many factors—your genes, your environment, and what you have been exposed to.

According to Susan Mills-Gray, MU Extension nutrition and health education specialist, “Most allergies begin in early childhood, so early environmental factors play a huge role in allergy development. But allergies can appear at any age and can also go away for a time—or for good. Allergies can be unpredictable.”

An allergic reaction occurs when your immune system mistakes a normally harmless substance for a dangerous invader and produces a needless inflammatory response. This response creates antibodies, which are specific proteins designed to battle the “invader.”

So why do more children have allergies today than in the past?

The most popular theory, while controversial, is known as the hygiene hypothesis. As hygiene practices improved over the last century (along with the development of more vaccines and antibiotics), common infectious diseases dropped. That, of course, is a good thing—but could it be TOO MUCH of a good thing? Being too clean has its drawbacks.

Infants and preschoolers are exposed to fewer bacteria and allergens early in life, at a time when their immune system is developing. The immune system fails to learn the difference between friend and enemy, so it eventually views harmless things (like pollen or peanuts) as dangerous and overreacts, which produces allergic reactions.

Children are also exposed to fewer infectious germs due to smaller family size (more siblings means more germs get passed back and forth), and they are less likely to grow up on farms (so fewer kids are exposed to the allergy-protective effect of animals).

The flood of antibacterial products (hand sanitizers, antibacterial soaps) on the market may further be adding to the problem.

Another less popular theory is the microflora hypothesis. It contends that exposure to microbes early in life affects the population of bacteria in the intestines (called microflora), which, in turn, influences long-term immunity. Lower numbers of moms breastfeeding, as well as more C-section births, are connected to this theory.

So what to do we do? First, don’t stop vaccinating your child from infectious diseases. Encourage moms to breastfeed. Make sure meat and poultry are cooked to correct temperatures. Most importantly, there’s no need to be overly clean—a little dirt is okay and perhaps even healthy. As parenting experts advise, let kids be kids.

MU Extension contributors:
Everyone is busy—busier and busier. So how do we fit in fitness? Keep reading for some great ideas to include exercise in your daily routine.

Oftentimes we rush from activity to activity daily with little to no breaks—so finding time to include exercise can be difficult. According to Megan Webb, MU Extension nutrition and health education specialist, “One great way many families are able to fit in exercise, for everyone, as a family—is to make it part of a regular family activity, like eating supper.”

For instance, add a family after-dinner walk to your dinner routine. This can be done regardless of where you eat—whether you dine at home, eat at a restaurant, or if you eat at an event—such as a parent-teacher association meeting. This can also help to encourage those dinner-table conversations continuing on just a little longer.

Another idea is to add an activity to the morning routine. While many kids (adults too) may not like the idea of getting up 30 minutes earlier—getting a jump on the day with exercise can help wake you, improve your mood, and start your day by checking exercise off of your to-do list. One great early morning option for the whole family is to complete a workout video together (these are great because there is no prep work required and they are for an exact amount of time), try aerobic dance or Pilates.

Another idea is to take a walk together. Have a dog? Consider taking him or her too; dogs need exercise too. It may be difficult at first to wake-up earlier, but after a few weeks, it will be a part of your normal routine—maybe your favorite part.

When children learn to be active and exercise early in life they are more likely to continue healthy physical habits. Modeling good exercise habits as a parent helps reinforce the healthy habit and it is good for your health too.

### Are today’s children spoiled?

Typically, older generations look at younger generations and think kids are more spoiled today than when they were growing up! Is this just the typical generation gap or are kids today truly being overindulged/spoiled?

What is overindulgence and how does it actually affect children?

Jean Clarke, Ph.D.; Connie Dawson, Ph.D.; and David Bredehoft, Ph.D. studied 3,500 participants and looked at that question. Overindulgence comes from good intentions—the desire to provide joy and happiness to a child’s life. According to Diana Milne, MU Extension human development specialist, “Occasionally, overindulgence is beneficial, but when it becomes the norm it can cause problems.”

The researchers discovered there are strong links between overindulgence in childhood and a lack of important life skills in adulthood.

Clarke, Dawson and Bredehoft found three types of overindulgence:

1. **“Too Much”**
   - Giving kids too many toys and clothing, overspending on activities, entertainment, vacations and even junk food. Always giving “too much” means that kids never learn the skill of knowing how much is “enough”. There is a difference. Parents need to model it and teach it so children can learn the difference.

2. **“Overnurturing”**
   - This involves doing things for children that they could and should be doing for themselves. It also means learning to handle situations that they are able to master on their own. The result can be a child whose role in life is to only be cute, helpless or manipulative.

3. **“Soft Structure”**
   - This has to do with giving kids too much freedom and license. It can also mean giving them choices or experiences that are not appropriate for their age. It may mean that kids are “running the show” rather than the parents!

Knowing what is “enough” supports the goal of raising children to become adults who care about others and the world around them, rather than focusing entirely on meeting their own desires all the time.