



## Back to School: How to Help Prevent the Spread of Germs in the Classroom

*By Barbara M. Soule, RN, MPA, CIC*

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As students return to the classroom with brand-new backpacks and high hopes for a good academic year, an invisible army of microbes is preparing an attack on the little learners. Legions of cold and flu viruses are determined to circulate through the “student body” in a show of force that will make school PTA newsletter headlines. Lost learning hours will accumulate as germs proliferate, aided and abetted by a few strategic lapses in classroom and personal hygiene.

The following tips can help students avoid contracting cold and flu infection in the classroom, where the only good infection is the spread of knowledge:

### **Teach children to wash their hands, properly and often.**

Germs rely on hand-to-face transmission, so hand-washing is critical. Germs can enter the body readily through hand contact with the mouth, eye or nose. One [study](#) found children under two years old bring their fingers to their faces 81 times per hour! For older children the number declines to 42, still a significant number of trips to the face.

Have your children hum the “Happy Birthday Song” twice while lathering and rinsing to get the most out of hand-washing. Washing hands is a must after using the bathroom, before handling food or before eating. University of Arizona Professor Charles Gerba found the playground may be a [major germ-transfer zone](#), so students should also wash their hands after coming in from recess.

### **Teach children to “cover their cough”.**

Coughing is a very efficient method of spreading germs to a wide array of other children and environmental surfaces. Schools can provide children with tissues and also teach them how to use [their arm to cover their mouth](#) when coughing. If they cough and use their hands to cover their mouth and nose, a quick trip to the sink for soap and water hand-washing before touching other children or objects will help foil the germ army advance.

### **Consult your doctor and vaccinate your child against the flu.**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) recommends children of ages six months and older be vaccinated yearly against influenza (the flu). According to CDC, it is best to vaccinate before December to ensure protective antibodies are in place before flu activity peaks

**Send children to school with necessary supplies.**

Dr. Gerba found the [germiest place in the classrooms of 4th to 6th graders is the pencil sharpener](#). To minimize your child's contact with that hot spot, send your student to school with a mechanical pencil or a portable pencil sharpener. Make sure your child has all recommended school supplies to minimize borrowing from the classmate with the sniffles across the aisle.

**Check with your child's school to ensure desks and other frequently touched surfaces are routinely disinfected.**

A classroom that looks clean could actually be a haven for viruses and bacteria. According to Dr. Gerba, desktops are second only to pencil sharpeners in sustaining germ populations in the 4th through 6th grade classrooms. Does your child's school disinfect desktops and pencil sharpeners?

Washing desk tops with detergent and water can help remove germs, but cleaning rags and sponges, which often harbor germs themselves, may introduce or simply move microbes around on surfaces. Cleaning should be followed by appropriate disinfection. For example, [a simple solution of ¼ cup chlorine bleach in one gallon of water](#) routinely applied to desktops and other frequently touched classroom surfaces during after-school maintenance can help destroy the flu virus.

Here's to a happy and healthy school year!

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