

## Preventing Illness in Child Care and Early Learning Programs: A Checklist for Teachers

**How to use this checklist:** This checklist provides strategies early learning program administrators and teachers can use to prevent and control the spread of illness. It lists the rationale (the **Why?**), as well as the action step (**What should I do?**) to take for each strategy. Many of the strategies suggest using support tools, which can be found on our website: [kingcounty.gov/childcare](http://kingcounty.gov/childcare). **You might find it useful to print the tools from the links below so you have them available when you need them.** To learn more about illnesses and how they spread, please see the additional information at the end of the checklist.

### Monitor for Signs of Illness

**Why is this important?** The sooner you identify people who are sick, the sooner they can be sent home. This helps germs from spreading in your classroom.

#### What should I do?

- Look for signs of illness when children arrive and throughout the day. Signs of illness can include flushed cheeks, fast breathing or difficulty breathing (without recent physical activity), acting more tired than usual, or being crankier or crying more than usual.
- Follow the guidelines in the [thermometer handout](#) if staff need to take a child's temperature.
- Notify your administrator and follow your program's sickness policy if a child shows signs of illness.

### Wash Hands

**Why is this important?** Washing hands physically removes germs from hands that may have touched an object with a germ on it.

#### What should I do?

- Follow handwashing steps outlined in [WAC 110-300-0200](#).
- Make sure soap, water, and paper towels or alcohol-based hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) are available. These should also be available outdoors.
- When using hand sanitizer on children:
  - Hands cannot be visibly dirty. Dirt needs to be removed by washing with running water.
  - A [hand sanitizer authorization form](#) must be completed by parent/guardian

each year before use. (Translations available at [kingcounty.gov/childcare](https://kingcounty.gov/childcare) under the “Health forms and care plans” icon.)

- It must never be used on children under 2 years.

## Cover Coughs and Sneezes

**Why?** Many viruses, like influenza and Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), can live in respiratory droplets from coughs, sneezes, runny noses, and saliva (drool). **Covering coughs and sneezes helps prevent these droplets from landing on surfaces or entering someone else’s mouth, nose, and eyes.**

### What should I do?

- Teach children how to cough and sneeze into their elbow, not their hands.
- Teach children to turn away from people if they need to cough or sneeze.
- Wash hands often.
- Throw away used tissues and wash hands after wiping noses.

## Clean, Sanitize, and Disinfect

**Why?** Many germs can live on surfaces and objects. For example, Norovirus (which causes vomiting and diarrhea) can live on a surface for weeks! **Using the 3-Step Method to clean, rinse, and either sanitize or disinfect objects and surfaces reduces or kills germs so they can’t spread and make people sick.**

### What should I do?

- Follow the [3-Step Method](#) (Clean, Rinse, and Sanitize or Disinfect) and post signs as a reminder of the steps. (Translations available at [kingcounty.gov/childcare](https://kingcounty.gov/childcare) under the “Cleaning and bleach” icon.)
- Get your DCYF licensor’s approval before using any sanitizing or disinfectant product other than bleach. This is a WAC requirement.
- Follow your program’s [cleaning schedule](#). (Translations available at [kingcounty.gov/childcare](https://kingcounty.gov/childcare) under the “Cleaning and bleach” icon.)
- Place any toy that has been drooled on or put into a baby’s mouth into a bin so it can be cleaned and sanitized later. **Mouthed toys should never be shared.**

## Improve Indoor Air Quality

**Why?** Some germs linger in the air and can be breathed in, like the viruses that cause measles, chickenpox, and COVID-19. By improving indoor air quality, more fresh air can fill rooms and reduce the amount of virus in the air.

### What should I do?

- Adjust the Heating Ventilation and Cooling (HVAC) system to allow the outside air to enter the program space.
- Consider using a portable HEPA air purifier in classrooms.
- Use child-safe fans that blow away from people and to the outside.
- If the bathroom has a fan, keep it on throughout the day.
- Offer more outside time; keep windows and doors open to circulate the air while children are out of the room.
- Open windows and doors – if safe to do so – when children are present.
- Visit [Improving indoor air quality - King County, Washington](#) for more information.

## Reduce the Spread of Germs When Changing Diapers and Toileting

**Why?** Some germs that are spread through stool (poop), like Hand, Foot, and Mouth disease or Norovirus, can accidentally get wiped onto surfaces or become airborne and land on nearby objects or surfaces. Limiting items in the diaper changing area, washing hands, and making sure any surface or object in the changing area can be easily cleaned and disinfected reduces germs spread through stool (poop).

### What should I do?

- Make sure everyone washes their hands after using the toilet.
- Follow the [How to Change a Diaper](#) procedure. (Available in [Spanish](#).)
  - Providers must wash hands at three separate times during a diaper change.
  - Children must wash hands with soap and water at the end of a diaper change.
- Keep any items not used during diapering (for example, clipboards with diaper cream forms, toys, or hanging mobiles) away from the changing space.
- Use the 3-Step Method to clean, rinse, and **disinfect** the diaper changing surface or bathroom.
- If using a non-flushing toilet, like a toilet-training chair:
  - be sure it is made from a material that can be easily cleaned and disinfected.
  - the chair and the area around it should be cleaned, rinsed, and disinfected after each use.
  - see the [WAC 110-300-0220](#) for more details about cleaning toilet-training equipment.

## Reduce the Spread of Germs When Toothbrushing

**Why?** Because many germs can live in saliva, it is important to take steps to prevent the

spread of germs from one toothbrush to another or one child to another when brushing teeth.

**What should I do?**

- Follow the recommended [toothbrushing procedure \(at the table\)](#).
- Store toothbrushes:
  - open to air with the bristles up so they can dry.
  - unable to drip on one another.
  - in a labeled, designated slot on a storage rack, not in contact with any other toothbrush or another child's storage slot.

**Reduce the Spread of Germs During Sleep**

**Why?** Because many germs can spread through the air – and children don't cover their coughs and sneezes while sleeping – keeping sleeping children at a distance from each other can help reduce the spread of germs.

**What should I do?**

- Keep each nap mat or cot separated by at least 18 inches on each side.
- Place children head-to-toe or toe-to-toe to increase the distance between sleeping children's faces.
- Place cribs at least 30 inches apart from each other, or, if space is tight, you can place cribs end-to-end as long as they are separated by a solid barrier like Plexiglas.
- Refer to your program's [cleaning schedule](#) for information on cleaning sleep equipment and sheets.

## More Information on Illnesses and How They Spread

Communicable diseases – illnesses that spread from one person to another – can only spread if three things are present: a germ, a person who is more likely to get the germ or get sick if they get the germ in their body, and a way for the germ to move to a person. Child care and early learning programs have all three elements, but this checklist aims to provide strategies to reduce them.

The **germs** discussed in the checklist are viruses, bacteria, fungi, or parasites that may cause illness.

There are many reasons **a person may be more likely to get a germ**. In child care, children are close together and are more likely to put objects in their mouth, both of which make them more likely to get germs into their body. Not washing hands (or not washing them well enough) makes it more likely for germs to get into a person's body. Open wounds or uncovered cuts are also a risk factor because they can allow germs to enter someone's body.

When germs move from one person and get into another person's body, it is called **transmission**. There are three main types of transmission that are common in child care, including:

- **Droplet transmission** – This occurs when a person with certain respiratory viruses or bacterial infections releases droplets from their coughs, sneezes, saliva, or fluid from a runny nose into the air, onto surfaces, or directly onto mucous membranes in the eyes, nose, or mouth. These respiratory droplets carry the virus or bacteria, but they usually don't travel more than 3 to 6 feet because they are relatively large and heavy. Another person can get the germs into their body if the droplets land directly into their mucus membranes (eyes, nose, or mouth), or by touching a surface or object that has the droplets on it and then touching their eyes, nose, or mouth. Examples of diseases that are spread through droplet transmission are:
  - *Bordetella pertussis* bacterium (whooping cough) (can be prevented by the DTap or Tdap vaccine)
  - Influenza virus (can be prevented by the influenza vaccine)
  - Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)
  - COVID-19 virus (severity can be lessened by the COVID-19 vaccine)
  - Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD)
  - Norovirus
  - Mumps virus – (can be prevented by the MMR vaccine)
- **Airborne transmission** – This occurs when someone with a virus or bacteria exhales, talks, sings, coughs, or sneezes and releases smaller particles of virus into the air. Because these particles are so small and light, they hang in the air and can stay there for hours. Another person can get these germs into their body by breathing in the small particles in the air.

- Examples of diseases that are spread through airborne transmission are:
  - *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* bacterium (Tuberculosis)
  - Rubeola virus (measles) – (can be prevented by the MMR vaccine)
  - SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19) (severity can be lessened by the COVID-19 vaccine)
  - Varicella-zoster virus (chickenpox) (can be prevented by the varicella vaccine)
- **Contact transmission** – This occurs when a fungus, bacteria, virus, or parasite from one person get into or onto another person’s body. This can happen in two ways.
  - **Direct** – If a person touches their own rash that has germs in it, (for example, blisters from chickenpox or impetigo rash), then touches another person, their germs can get into another person’s body through an uncovered cut, sore, or crack in the skin. Direct contact transmission can also occur with parasites, like lice or scabies, if two people have skin-to-skin or head-to-head contact long enough for the parasites to crawl from one person to another.
  - **Indirect** – When a virus, bacteria, or fungus gets onto hands, surfaces, or objects, this is called **contamination**. If another person touches contaminated hands, objects, or surfaces, doesn’t wash their hands (or doesn’t wash their hands well enough) and then touches their own mouth, eyes, or nose or an opening in the skin like an uncovered cut, the germs can get into their body and make them sick.
    - **Fecal-Oral transmission** – This is a specific example of indirect transmission. Fecal-oral transmission occurs when bacteria or viruses in the stool (poop) of one person get into the mouth and are swallowed by another person. This happens when someone who has an illness that involves germs that live in stool (poop) does not wash their hands well enough to remove the germs after using the restroom, then transfers the germs to objects or food. Another person can get sick by either eating the food that has the germs in it, or by touching the object that has a germ on it, not washing hands, then putting their hands in their mouth.
  - Examples of diseases that are spread through contact transmission are:
    - Impetigo and MRSA infections caused by Staphylococcus and Streptococcus bacteria
    - Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD)
    - Norovirus
    - SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19) (vaccine available for prevention)
    - Varicella-zoster virus (chickenpox) (can be prevented by the varicella vaccine)
    - Rotavirus (vaccine available for prevention)

Some diseases are spread in multiple ways (for example, COVID-19 can be spread through droplet, airborne, and contact transmission). Using only one strategy, such as cleaning surfaces, for an illness that can also be spread through airborne transmission, may not be enough to get rid of the germ. To effectively reduce germs, prevent the spread of germs, and prevent illness, it is important to use multiple strategies.

## How Does the 3-Step Method Work to Prevent Illness?

1. **Clean** – Cleaning is done with soap, water and scrubbing. This step removes dirt from surfaces and can remove most types of harmful germs that cause illnesses.
2. **Rinse** – Sanitizers and disinfectants do not work if there is a soap film leftover from the first step. The soap film needs to be rinsed off with plain water so sanitizers and disinfectants can do their job.
3. **Sanitize** – While one goal is to get rid of germs so they can't spread, we also don't want harsh chemicals to get into young children's developing bodies. The amount of bleach in sanitizers is considered safe to use on items that might be placed in a child's mouth (pacifiers and infant toys) or surfaces that food might touch (like plates and eating utensils). **Sanitizers reduce the number of germs left on surfaces after cleaning so there are fewer germs that could spread infection and cause illness.**

Or

3. **Disinfect** – Some germs that live in stool (poop), blood, and other bodily fluids can cause severe illness or disease. The goal is to kill these germs, not just reduce them. Because **disinfectant kills germs left on surfaces after cleaning**, it is used on surfaces where germs that cause severe illness may live (in bathrooms and diapering areas). It is also used to clean up bodily fluids, blood, or other potentially infectious materials (OPIM).

## References

**American Academy of Pediatrics.** Managing Infectious Diseases in Child Care and Schools, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.** Website.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/spread/index.html>

**National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Learning.** Website. <https://nrckids.org/CFOC/TOC>