

Too clean for your children's good

Parents should learn to keep the optimal balance between avoidance and exposure to germs as being overly clean carries its own risk of disease



Venessa Lee

Parents who are excessively concerned about cleanliness may wish to put away the hand sanitiser occasionally.

While a recent study shone a spotlight on how some children's bath toys, such as rubber ducks, can harbour harmful bacteria, medical experts say there is also such a thing as being too clean, which presents other health risks.

Some parents interviewed by The Sunday Times say they are aware of the need not to raise their children in overly clean environments, but also see benefits in scrupulous hygiene routines.

Ms Ashlyn Thia, for example, takes pride in keeping the home clean for her children, even if it takes more time.

The 31-year-old regularly does one set of laundry for her two daughters and another set for herself and her husband.

She separates the family's clothes before loading the washing machine because she thinks adults' clothes are "more unhygienic" as grown-ups get out and about more than young children.

Dishwashing is organised along similar lines.

She cleans the utensils and cutlery used by daughters Emmalyn, aged five, and Avalyn, who is 10 months old, using a liquid cleanser that is marketed as being child-friendly with a formulation that does not cause irritation.

She and her husband, Mr Thomas Ng, 37, who works in sales in the IT industry, use a different dishwashing liquid for their utensils.

Ms Thia, who is an administrator and has a parenting and lifestyle blog, AshlynThia.blogspot.sg, says: "As a full-time working mum, I don't clean as much as I would love to. I just do the best I can to keep my house clean, safe and healthy for my family."

She does the bulk of the housework and says she believes her cleaning regimen has been effective so far because her children do not have skin or respiratory problems.

Some parents say they became more rigorous about certain hygiene routines because of their child's health condition.

Allergens that may trigger flare-ups of two-year-old Abraham's eczema include dust and dust mites. In the past, the toddler had scratched the itch caused by eczema until his skin bled.

Since their youngest child's eczema diagnosis, Ms Sharon Alexander, 41, and Mr Clement Prasobhan, 43, ensure that each of the mattresses that Abraham and his three elder sisters sleep on is vacuumed more frequently. Their domestic helper, 30-year-old Gemmalyn Asistin, vacuums them once a week.

Other hygiene routines observed by Mr Clement and Ms Sharon, who work at the same statutory board, include using Dettol to disinfect table tops and other surfaces in their home when a child falls sick, in a bid to prevent the spread of illness. The family also takes probiotics regularly during such times.

Ms Sharon says their hygiene practices for their children are "normal, nothing too extreme".

It is no wonder that parents are concerned about hygiene risks, when even traditional children's toys can pose dangers to health.



Ms Ashlyn Thia, with daughters Avalyn (left) and Emmalyn (right), separates adult laundry from the children's before each wash. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID



The Clements get their domestic helper Gemmalyn Asistin, with children (from left) Julia, Abraham, Gloria and Alicia Sarah, to vacuum the mattresses once a week. ST PHOTO: ALVIN HO

Late last month, Swiss and American researchers were reported to have discovered that rubber ducks used as bath-time toys are a haven for bacteria that could spread diseases.

The study found that the liquid released when rubber ducks were squeezed contained "potentially pathogenic bacteria".

But not all germs associated with children's routines are harmful. Professor Hugo Van Bever, senior consultant at the Division of Paediatric Allergy, Immunology and Rheumatology, National University Hospital, says: "There are different types of germs, of which the ones we are mainly concerned with are viruses and bacteria."

"Viruses are generally considered harmful and they spread many types of disease, such as influenza

and hand, foot and mouth disease. However, most viruses can be transmitted only through direct contact with a person carrying the virus (a person with flu) and viruses are not part of dirt."

He adds: "Harmful bacteria such as the ones found on the rubber ducks in that study - Legionella and Pseudomonas aeruginosa - should be avoided."

"But other bacteria are more benign and are important for health and the day-to-day functioning of the body. For example, millions of good bacteria inhabit the human gut and skin and form a vital part of the human digestive process and immune system."

In fact, he says that being too clean carries its own risk of disease. "Being too clean and avoiding germs has resulted in the increase

of a number of diseases, including obesity, diabetes, auto-immune diseases and allergic diseases such as asthma, eczema, food allergy and allergic rhinitis," he says.



PROFESSOR HUGO VAN BEVER. He is a senior consultant at the Division of Paediatric Allergy, Immunology and Rheumatology, National University Hospital

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The challenge, he adds, is for children to keep the optimal balance between avoidance and exposure to germs.

For Ms Merissa Goh, 30, having her first child, Xavier, made her more hygiene-conscious, but she has since relaxed her stance.

"When he was born, we erred on the side of caution," says Ms Goh, who is married to a 35-year-old financial planner. Their son is now nine months old.

Xavier had a bad bout of baby acne shortly after he was born, prompting his doctor to advise that he should be kept clean. His parents changed his bedding daily as a result.

Now, his playmat is wiped down daily after play-time and, because he is teething, toys that are drooled over are washed every day.

Ms Goh, who works as a marketing and communications manager, says: "My husband and I do maintain a certain level of hygiene in our home. However, we don't believe in raising a child in a completely sterile environment. We believe a little dirt is good for children, helping them build their immunity and preparing them for the real world."

They have not made significant changes to their lifestyle. They take their son out and let him play with his grandmother's pet dog - as long as he washes his hands afterwards.

venessal@sph.com.sg