

## Ten Things Teachers Can Do to Create Healthy Classrooms

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- 1. Reinforce and make time for healthy practices: covering sneezes, hand washing with soap.** Contrary to popular belief, most cold germs are passed on hands, not by sneezing.
- 2. Encourage kids to go outside for recess.** The outdoor air, especially in the winter, is more humid, and much fresher than the air indoors, which tends to be drying to the mucous membranes, increasing the incidences of nosebleeds, impetigo, chapped lips, ear infections, and upper respiratory infections. Heated indoor air is germ-laden and dusty. Although some asthmatics have attacks from air that is too cold, usually below 20 degrees, children with colds benefit from the humidity of outdoor air.
- 3. Find alternatives to having kids stay in for recess to make up unfinished work.** Kids need the change, exercise, and sunshine, especially in the winter, when outdoor time is so limited anyway. Unproductive, restless or unmotivated children probably need it the most.
- 4. Create opportunities to drink water.** Don't think of trips to the water fountain as time-consuming side trips. Most kids drink only the few ounces of fluid that comes with lunch through the entire day. Too little fluids contribute to poor hydration. Poor hydration results in dry mucous membranes (see above), constipation (the cause of most belly aches in school), headaches (the reason for most visits to the school nurse), fevers, bladder infections, and dry itchy skin.
- 5. Empower kids by encouraging self-responsibility for maintaining health and comfort by giving positive reinforcement for healthy food choices in the snack or lunch, for appropriate dress, for self-care.** Don't foster the idea that health and comfort only come from medicine, or others taking care of everything for them. You can do this by: having kids wash their own minor scrapes, hangnails and paper cuts in the classroom, and applying band aides themselves; having kids apply pressure to minor nosebleeds right in class; offering drinks, rest, time out, a change of activity etc. for vague complaints of not feeling good. In this way, you respond to the real need without providing payoffs for being sick. Often, a trip to the nurse is a payoff in that it provides a

diversion, an out when the child doesn't want to do the class work, and this reinforces that being sick or hurt is a way to deal with frustration. Point out the pay-offs for making good choices, and don't provide payoffs for poor ones.

**6.** Think about the messages you are sending to children when you send them to the nurse for minor discomforts associated with normal life events such as loose teeth, choices in clothing, old scrapes or bruises that are obviously well-tended and healing, stuffy noses, invisible itchy spots.

**7.** Consider hunger or needing to use the bathroom when a child complains of a belly ache, especially if it is late morning or early afternoon. Ask the child to try eating a snack or using the bathroom before sending him to the nurse with a sick message. These are probably the first things she will ask, and many belly ache visits can be attributed to one of the two.

**8.** Let the child name or describe the problem. Well-meaning teachers often tell children that they look sick, and children buy into the idea because the compassion that accompanies it provides a psychological hug

**9.** Express the expectation that your class will be healthy. Like the expectation of success, children believe you and will fulfill your expectations. no doubt, the most powerful preventative is this teacher's willingness to give psychological and physical hugs, and her expressed expectation of wellness.

**10.** Convey the message that nurses and other healthcare workers are resources to help us stay well. If every teacher in your school did just the nine things listed above, there would be fewer sick children in your school and fewer needless visits to the nurse. With all her newly- free time, your school nurse could spend more time on prevention activities such as screening, health education, counseling, and safety.