

A photograph of a woman and a young child in a kitchen. The woman is on the left, wearing a white polo shirt, and is holding a bowl of green vegetables. The child is on the right, also in a white shirt, and is washing a vegetable in a kitchen sink. A window with a view of greenery is in the background.

# How to Help your Child Overcome Germ-Anxiety

In reality, germs can be a pretty scary concept for children, especially when terms like ‘tiny monsters’ are used. They’re the bad guys that make you sick – naturally, some children can get a bit nervous or overly-cautious when it comes to preventing germs from spreading or staying hygienic. A child’s fear when it comes to germs can get irrational and pretty intense if they don’t fully understand certain key aspects. If you don’t address their issues and fears, it may start to disrupt their daily lives and impact their self-esteem. Germ anxiety refers to an extreme fear of germs, so much so that your toddler may not be able to cope with everyday activities. Signs include not wanting to touch anything, excessively washing their hands and an abnormal obsession with germs which leads to fear and anxiety.

## What can you do to decrease germ anxiety?

A fear of germs is called Mysophobia or more commonly known as Germaphobia. Anxiety disorders like OCD can also influence germaphobia. Treatment for dealing with germaphobia includes:

### 01 Give Germs a Makeover

Try to change the way your kids think about germs. Rather than describing them as something to fear, try to deal with germs in an overly positive way if you pick up on irrational fears. Teach them why certain practices are important like washing their hands or brushing their teeth. Explain to them how it works and takes time to show them how to do it properly. Your children are the superheroes of this story and are much stronger than the germs. Teach your child about a healthy diet and aiding their bodies in the fight against germs. Help your kid understand that with the right diet and exercise, germs are nothing to worry about.

02

## Seek professional help

If the situation seems to go a bit deeper than your reach as a parent, consider having your child talk to a mental health professional who specialises in exposure therapy. According to research, exposure therapy is done by exposing the child to a safe and controlled environment to the situations or objects they fear. The exposures will usually happen over time and will build up in intensity as the child can handle more. Talk to your child's doctor about a referral to a therapist who uses exposure therapy. Help your child become optimistic about therapy and offer your ongoing support. Gently remind your child of what they learned in therapy each week.

03

## Exposure Therapy

For kids with severe germ phobia, exposure therapy is frequently an option to help them overcome their fear of germs and helps them increase their tolerance. Exposure therapy should be done by professionals who can evaluate the intensity of your child's phobia as there are certain objects or things that might be more anxiety provoking than others. The foundation of exposure therapy is to get your child to experience and touch things that they would usually avoid because of their germ-anxiety.

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