

Eating Dirt Could be good for you

By Guida Lawrence

When we watch how infants and toddlers explore so much of their world with their mouth, this could be good news. As spring and summer are here, the babies will spend time outside on the deck. They will come into contact with dirt. We have a garden, a sandpit, trees, leaves, herbs, grasses, chipbark, stones, rainwater, in fact all the elements of the natural urban environment. The good news is that research has shown how eating a little dirt activates the baby's immune response. Without babies' instinctive drive to mouth everything, their immature immune system would not be exposed to the very things which help it develop, learning what to ignore and what to respond to. According to Dr Weinstock at Tufts Medical Centre in Boston, "children raised in an ultraclean environment are not being exposed to organisms that help them develop appropriate immune regulatory circuits".

Although we can be concerned about bacteria as a source of infections and illnesses, it is handy to know that the mouth, throat and intestines are actually like the outside of our bodies - and capable of handling the thousands of species of bacteria which eventually inhabit us! (We are born sterile - but within hours bacteria begin colonizing us.)

A big concern today is the over-use of antibacterial products which promote fear of bacteria and in fact may actually contribute to antibiotic-resistant, disease-causing bacteria. In the babies' room at TLC, we teachers use either soap and water for our own hands, and a

sanitising hand rub after wiping a child's nose. And of course if a child exhibits a bacterial infection like conjunctivitis they are isolated from contact with the other babies and then go home. Immediately after this we wash the babies' toys - with soap and water, and some of them are sun-dried. (Toys are washed weekly in normal circumstances.) The only anti-bacterial product we use is for wiping the nappy change table. The dining table is wiped with diluted mild soap spray after eating; and glasses, plates and spoons are washed with eco-friendly washing powder. Bibs and facecloths go through the washing machine with standard laundry detergent and a splash of Dettol. And that's all. We want to minimise infants' exposure to chemical anti-bacterial products. Their world is not a hospital!

Another concern, and rightly so, is legionnaires disease. Legionnaires is an infectious disease caused by inhaling air particles which carry the bacteria. The bacteria actually live and breed in water, and are usually found in airconditioning units etc, but could also be carried in the moisture in soil. To reduce any risk, when potting up plants we allow the mix to dry and rest for several weeks before introducing it into the children's environment.

This summer, we encourage you to let your babies roam - outside on the grass, at the beach, in the garden - playing and perhaps grazing on a little dirt. And rest assured that their immune systems will thank you!

EE Cummings

The world is mud-licious and puddle-wonderful

