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Parents considering a nursery school for their child need to consider the school environment and whether it fosters health and well being

BY MEGHANIEEN DUTTA LINGAM

IT IS THAT time of the year when parents like you are busy shopping for mickey mouse school bags, multi coloured tiffin boxes and water bottles — gearing up for their toddler's first stint in school. Most of you are probably breathing a sigh of relief after surviving the stiff competition of nursery admissions — rejoicing that your little one has finally made it into that nursery. But hold on to that precious breath. While you may be pleased about the academic standards of the school, your child may not actually be in the healthiest of surroundings. The hygiene in nursery schools is an aspect of supreme importance considering that kids in this age group of three to five are most prone to multiple infections. Most of these are self limiting and minor. Environments such as nurseries, where children mingle with each other are particularly prone to the spread of infections. For some children, recurrent infections can become a problem. They can mean a child is frequently ill, with a fever or cough. With time, we all build immunity to certain infections so young children who have not yet developed this immunity get infections more frequently than adults. This is precisely why one needs to be more careful with little children of this age.

HYGIENE DICTATED THEIR CHOICE

Popular musician couple Saskia and Shubbendra Rao are intensely involved parents, keen to make informed decisions about every aspect of their son Ishan's life. Their most recent dilemma was to choose the right school for their four-and-a-half year old child to do his pre-primary (equivalent of KG). After doing the rounds of many schools in the city, they finally zeroed in on Mother's International school. One of the most important considerations for them was the standards of hygiene in the environment. Saskia made it a point to visit the classrooms and toilets to check on the levels of cleanliness. She also took the initiative to head to the kitchen and take stock of how hygienically the food is cooked and served. This apart, she enquired if there was a doctor on call, if they had a first-aid box at hand and the teachers were trained enough to handle first aid administration to the kid.

Two years ago when it was time to admit Ishan into a play school, Saskia was just as particular in her search for the place for her son. "I cannot tell you how many dirty, unkempt play schools exist. My husband and I scored plenty off the list before we found a good one." The playschool that Ishan finally went to, held frequent health camps and a dentist too was invited for a checkup of the kids. Software professional Koshni Sharma has been equally fussy about choosing the right environment for her son. She could have admitted him to the neighbourhood playschool but chose one further away since it was better maintained. "The school which would have been more convenient did not maintain enough hygiene, and also didn't have enough constructive activity to channelise the energy of my over-active child," explains Koshni. After a few searches she zeroed in on Mother's Pride, which was located at a distance from her home, but she felt it was worth it for the clean and hygienically maintained premises.

Koshni made it a point to inspect the classrooms, play area and the washrooms, all of which were clean and well maintained and met her expectations. She wasn't allowed to inspect the kitchen but luckily the food inspector at the school happened to be a friend and assured her about the hygienic method of cooking and quality of food. Feeling at peace she admitted her son in this school.

OUR KID'S HEALTH WAS OUR PRIME CONCERN



"The importance of hygiene at a nursery school cannot be overlooked at any cost. It is the onus of the school not just to maintain a healthy environment, but to help children imbibe the right ideas related to their health. They are receptive and learn habits quickly at this age."

— Rekha Bakshi, head, Junior school, Vasant Valley

PARENTS MUST BE VOLUBLE

Saskia feels that if you are not actively involved in your child's school and its system of functioning, authorities will also not take your needs seriously. "A parent must constantly be vocal about their expectations from a school and voice their views about anything wrong. Not find fault for its sake, instead give suggestions on what better can be done. After all, it is a team effort of the school management, teachers and parents for the well-being of the child," she declares. More and more schools are beginning to take suggestions from parents in their stride. They have come to realise that the opinions of parents go a long way in improving the working of the school.

HEALTH HABITS ARE LEARNED

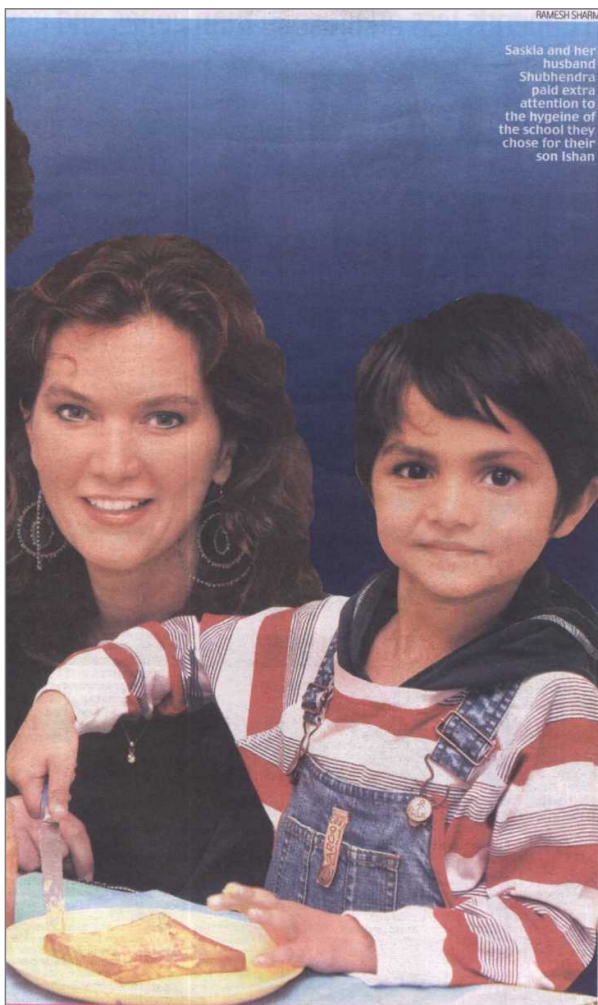
Apart from learning about hygiene at home, most parents expect schools to inculcate good health habits in their kids. Considering that children spend so many hours in these environments, it is important that they follow hygienic practices. Media professional Preetha Nair was pleasantly surprised at her toddler Ishan's awareness of hand-washing. "Even when we use a public wash-room she insists that her hand be washed after finishing her business," says Preetha. Most nurseries do make it a point to teach children a lot of the basic health habits like hand washing before and after a meal, after playing, covering their mouths while coughing and sneez-

ing, etc. "My son's school, DPS Vasant Vihar, insists that every child carries a sanitiser and wet wipes. The idea of cleanliness is instilled into him and he is aware of its importance at every level. This is a commendable concept taught to children when they are young," says Surabhi Palwa. The school's nursery section is an independent building and has two classrooms on each floor with dedicated washrooms for boys and girls. "Since there aren't too many classes on a floor, the load on toilet infrastructure is not too much. This in a way makes each child less susceptible to infections and spread of diseases," adds Palwa.

WHAT THE DOCTOR SAYS

"I would recommend that parents look for schools where the classes are not overcrowded. While infections are bound to spread and attack, at least a good teacher to student ratio ensures that your child is less prone to diseases and gets the much needed attention," says Dr Babita Jain, HOD, Paediatrics, Max hospital, Gurgaon. Hand-washing is one of the most important habits that should be practiced among children. Doctors advocate the use of toilet or tissue paper for wiping the hands instead of towels which get used by many therefore in turn transmit germs. "In this context, overlooking habits such as hand washing, thumb sucking and putting things in the mouth can be a drawback. The school should insist on the immunization of the child," says Dr Jain. Moreover, schools which serve food should have their cooks and *ayaths* (helpers) also medically examined and immunized, she adds. Also all electrical connections and open wires should be out of reach for the toddlers.

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RAMESH SHARMA
Saskia and her husband Shubhendra paid extra attention to the hygiene of the school they chose for their son Ishan

SCHOOL HYGIENE CHECKLIST

- Ensure drinking water supply is well filtered.
- Be particularly finicky about the cleanliness of the toilets. Make sure that the toilets are cleaned with disinfectants.
- See to it that the furniture in the classrooms and play area is child friendly with no sharp edges.
- Check that the class is not overcrowded as the chances of contracting an infection is higher when there are more kids.
- Take stock of the first aid kit available at the school. Enquire if there is a doctor, nurse or trained teacher to attend to any medical issue of your child. In case of a medical emergency, enquire how close the nearest doctor is.
- Insist on taking a round of the kitchen to satisfy yourself that the conditions in which the food is cooked are sanitary. Ensure food is prepared with gloves on.

water supply is put through a three tier filtering system and there have been no complaints so far of water borne diseases in children acquired from school," says Jyoti Bose, principal, Springdales school.

WASHROOMS AND TOILET HYGIENE IS ESSENTIAL

The washrooms have smaller units for the little kids. The sinks and wash basins too are small and at a very low height to match those of the children. "The toilets are such that they cannot be latched and a helper accompanies each child. It is a must that every helper assists each child in hand washing with soap," says Usha Ram, principal, Lakshman public school.

FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT MUST BE SOFT-EDGED

While maintaining clean and neat classroom surroundings is a given, schools also need to ensure they have children friendly furniture. "The chairs and tables in our school are child-friendly with rounded ends and no sharp edges. They are light, made of moulded plastic and easy to handle for the little ones," says Rekha Bakshi.

In most schools the play areas (for nursery sections) is usually cordoned off and not open to senior children. These areas have loose sand, so that kids don't get hurt if they fall. "The swings and slides in the play area are made of safe materials like GI pipes and fibre glass with smooth edges, leaving almost no chance for an injury to turn septic," says Ashutosh Batta, principal, Bloom public school. Moreover, teachers use dust less chalks and also interactive boards (which use dummy pens and are connected to computers).

The choice of toys is also important. "Toys kids play with should not be too small otherwise they will chew on them and may choke. Soft toys are an absolute no-no in nursery schools, as they are a great source of infection. It must be ensured that the toys used are of good quality and not made of toxic paints that could lead to poisoning," warns Dr Bhatnagar. Most schools try and avoid using toys and have the concept of using teaching aids — wooden blocks, flash cards, shapes, alphabets, etc. "We particularly steer clear from coloured toys. The senior children make cloth-based toys and puppets in their craft class which is in turn used by the nursery kids," says Jyoti Bose.

FIRST AID KIT IS ESSENTIAL

While most schools do have a basic first aid kit handy with band-aid, anti-allergic and anti-septic creams, savlon, detol, eye drops, cream for burns, paracetamol, etc. some have a doctor and nurse available in the premises, while others rush to a nearby clinic in the case of an emergency. "Our teachers handle basic medical care like cuts and bruises, but administer no medication. We have a dedicated emergency van stationed in the school to rush kids to the nearest hospital. We also have paraphernalia like oxygen cylinders and wheel-chairs," says Ashutosh Batta.

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Kids are most inclined to catch respiratory viral infections or droplet infections such as cold, cough and flu. Other virus based infections they could have are viral fever, chicken pox and measles. Girls are vulnerable to urinary tract infections. Through water contamination the kind of diseases they could infect include — typhoid, diarrhoea and Hepatitis A. Also contact infections such as scabies and lice are common.

CLEAN FOOD AND WATER

While a lot of schools serve food at their premises during meal time, parents are quite wary of its quality. "Often parents request me to issue a certificate declaring that their child should be allowed to eat only home cooked food," says Dr A K Bhatnagar, consultant paediatrician, Fortis hospital.

Schools are aware of parents' concerns about the quality of food served and are working to improve the entire process of cooking and serving food. "Food is served to children in foil, on plastic plates. This ensures cleanliness, and being disposable there is no question of reuse and eating off unclean utensils," says Rekha Bakshi, head, junior school, Vasant Valley. In addition to this, children are served healthy snacks like brown bread, nuts, milk, fruits, etc. she adds.

While parents do ensure that children carry their own water bottles to school, most schools have aquaguard filters in place or use the reverse osmosis (RO) system of filtering water. "The nursery division of our school follows a baggage-less concept where the kids come to school with nothing to carry. No books, food or water. The



KASHI
Koshni chose a school for Akshat based on its cleanliness