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MAY 2010

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Slimy stuff
helps kids
be creative.

Gross Fun

Why are kids this age attracted to disgusting things? We dug up the dirt and found simple strategies to help you deal.

BY TAMEKIA REECE

For the last seven days, "boogers" have filled my house. Nope, no one had a cold. My son, Darren, decided that it was going to be "booger week." He made up stories about candy boogers, flying boogers, mom boogers, and frog boogers. He even drew some yucky pictures to go along with his tales.

I have no idea what got him started, but I think his obsession is pretty normal. "From age 4 to 7, many kids become

fascinated by gross things," says Michelle P. Maidenberg, Ph.D., a psychotherapist and the clinical director of Westchester Group Works, in White Plains, New York. "They're also trying to assert control and push boundaries. Seeing how disgusting they can get is a way to test limits."

Well, I'm at mine. So I asked child-development experts how to handle this sticky situation and similar ones that will come up in the future. What follows is a cleanup plan.

Play Teacher

On the plus side, your child's interest in messy, gooey stuff can spark creative science projects and discussions about the human body and the animal kingdom. "If your child brings a worm inside the house, the two of you could take a look at the worm under a magnifying glass," says Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D., a child educational psychologist in Los Angeles and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*. "Or instead of playing with snot, you could swab your cheek and talk about how our body is made up of cells." In fact, there are plenty of ready-made science kits just for this purpose. (See "Slime Time.") And what if your child is obsessed with body noise? "Explain the physiology behind it,"

she suggests. For instance, your kid is less likely to think that belching is hysterical once he finds out that gas is created as the stomach acids digest food.

Pretend You Don't Care

For some kids, the coolest thing about yucky stuff is the reaction it gets. If you freak out when your son burps the alphabet or act embarrassed if your daughter talks about "pee tea," your kid will think it bothers you and do it even more, says Dr. Reznick. Instead, act like you couldn't care less. You can ignore it entirely or say, "Oh, that's interesting," in a flat tone and then move on to something else. Chances are your child will too.

Slime Time Satisfy your kid's penchant to yuck it up in a positive way with these clever picks.



Nasty Experiments

Kids can grow germs, create fake blood, and make a stinky intestine—with your help, of course. (\$13; discoverthis.com)

Beastly Boo-Boos

Cover your kids' scrapes with bandages featuring disgusting designs like creepy-crawlies and eyeballs. (\$4 for a pack of 20; scabsbandages.com)



Rotten Book

Check out Glenn Murphy's scientifically accurate answers to 240 pages worth of your kid's most queasy questions. (\$10; amazon.com)



Give 'Em Some Space

If you overhear your kid and her friend talking about dog vomit, scabs, earwax, or another unsavory topic, don't rush to correct them, says Betsy Brown Braun, a child-development and behavioral specialist in Los Angeles and author of *You're Not the Boss of Me: Brat-Proofing Your 4- to 12-Year-Old Child*. "They're not doing it to bother you; they're entertaining one another," she says. "When you give kids time and a place to get gross stuff out of their system, the fascination with it will dissipate on its own." But you do need to set some boundaries and enforce them. Let your kid know that this kind of humor isn't appropriate at church, in the classroom, or in someone else's house because not everyone enjoys hearing or talking about those things the way she does.

Raid the Fridge

If your child likes the squishiness of slime or mud, mimic the tactile feel with cookie dough or pizza crust. You could also try these other delightfully disgusting cooking projects: "dirt cup" (top chocolate frozen yogurt with chocolate cookie crumbs and candy bugs), "ants on a log" (fill a celery stick with peanut butter and top with raisins or dried cranberries), and "scary fingers" (bake breadstick dough in a finger shape and attach an almond sliver for a nail). Yum, gross! □

Q & A

My daughter is terrified of dogs. She doesn't even want to go on a playdate if the other family has a poodle. Is there any way to help her get over it?

Yes, but you have to acknowledge her anxiety, not belittle it. Say something like, "I know dogs can be scary because they have big teeth and a loud bark." Then help her come up with a plan for conquering her fear, suggests Donna Pincus, Ph.D., director of research for the Child and Adolescent Fear and Anxiety Treatment Program at Boston University. Start by looking at pictures of pooches and giving them silly names so they seem less intimidating and by renting videos with cute dogs (*101 Dalmatians*, anyone?). Eventually, you can go together to meet a friend's small, mellow dog. Give her some time to get comfortable. "Sometimes just holding the leash can give kids a sense of control," says Dr. Pincus.

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