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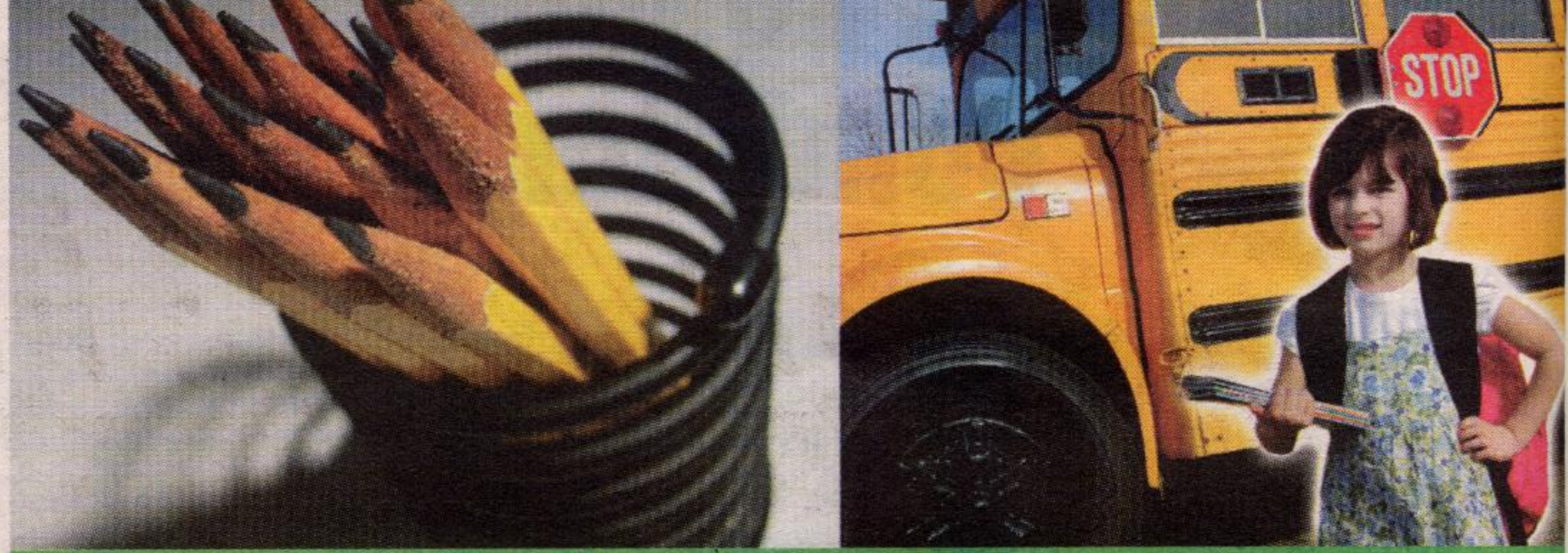
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THIS SPECIAL BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE HAIR



Back to School

The ABCs and 123s of staying healthy

Sending the kids back to school – the moment a parent waits for all summer. But doesn't it seem that once the school year begins, kids actually spend more time at home sick? The fact remains, back to school also means back to runny noses, coughs, fevers and even worse. "Any time you have large groups of people congregating in small rooms, germs are shared," says family physician, Dr. Jennifer Pettigrew. Since children are especially tactile, germs are spread more easily amongst this group than any other.

For those parents who seem to spend the majority of the year doling out cold medication and taking temperatures, following these simple steps will help keep their kids healthy and ready to learn this school year.

Know your ABCs

Attack germs! Encourage hand washing - a lot of it. According to Health Canada, washing your hands often with plenty of soap and warm water is the single most important factor in stopping the spread of illness. That's because most viruses are transmitted through germs that linger on hands after coughing or sneezing, on school desks, doorknobs or counters. "A child sneezes and covers her nose and mouth, then touches a book or toy and now the germs have spread," explains Dr. Pettigrew. The solution? Help your child get into the habit of washing their hands after a cough or sneeze, before eating lunch and of course after going to the bathroom. "Parents and caregivers should take a proactive role in helping their children stay healthy," says Dr. Pettigrew. "Sending them to school with an instant hand sanitizer, such as Purell, is an excellent solution to keep hands germ-free, especially when soap and water aren't readily available."

Be aware of symptoms. While sometimes it's just easier for parents to send sick children to school, this action has consequences - it's what keeps the vicious cycle of passing germs alive and kicking. Many teachers complain that colds are prevalent in their schools because students come to school when they are sick. "If your child shows any signs of a communicable illness - for instance, an obvious fever or red eyes - the school will almost always send him home," says Dr. Pettigrew. "So you may as well be on early alert for signs." Looking for these symptoms will help make a parent's decision easier: fever, disruptive cough, diarrhea or vomiting and contagious infections (e.g. pink-eye).

Cover the basics. There are two basic rules that parents should follow to help their kids stay healthy. Make sure children eat a good breakfast before school and encourage them to get enough sleep. Inadequate nutrition or sleep can lead to a compromised immune system and a child who's more likely to get sick.

Learn your 123s

One (1) physical a year. Most kids need one good thorough checkup a year to make sure all is healthy and well. According to Dr. Pettigrew, a quality physical should include examination of the head and neck, chest, abdomen and limbs. Weight and height should be checked, plus blood pressure when appropriate. As well, doctors should make sure all vaccinations are up-to-date, and discuss health promoting behaviours like physical activity and healthy eating.

Two (2) backpack straps. Kids to wear both straps when carrying the backpack. While it may be easier to carry the backpack on one shoulder, this action has consequences - it's what increases their risk of injury. Let your child carry an over-sized backpack. Strain and stress on the body result from lugging a book bag with books, notes and personal items. Parents should make sure the backpack is lightweight. And while the exact weight varies by child, a good rule of thumb is to limit the weight of your child's backpack to no more than 15 per cent of his or her body weight.

Three (3) feet away. It may seem common sense, but it's important to remember to avoid bodily fluids.

This means if a student has a cold, cough, or vomits anywhere in the classroom, encourage your child to stay away and not try to help. On the same note, children should be taught not to share hats, combs or other personal items, as one of the biggest problems in classrooms is lice outbreaks. Sharing a hairbrush or hair elastic can easily spread lice.

With a little forethought and preparation, your kids have a better chance of having a stress-free school year. Now only you could get them to do their homework!

Family physician Dr. Jennifer Pettigrew

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