Q. What is a virus?

These are tiny germs that need our body cells (called the "host") to survive and prosper. They contain genetic coding, DNA or RNA, material that are the building blocks to make more viruses.

Most viruses enter our bodies, reproduce for a few days, then leave to infect someone else. Examples include the cold virus and hand/foot/mouth diseases (see the table at the end of this section for a complete run-down of viruses with their common and scientific names). A few viruses like to stick around, lie dormant, and then reactivate to torture us again, such as herpes and chickenpox. Rarely, a virus kills their host—one example is HIV.

Here's some cocktail party trivia for you: according to the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (7th report, 2000), there are more than 1550 virus species, divided into 56 families. Within each family, there are sometimes thousands of relatives for each virus. These identified viruses are just a small portion of what is actually out in the world.

Q. Where do viruses live when they aren't infecting someone?

Viruses can be airborne or live on surfaces for a period of hours to days. Germs live on surfaces called **FOMITES.** Fomites include door handles, grocery carts, gas pumps, changing tables, shared toys, etc.

BOTTOM LINE: Your mother was right—WASH YOUR HANDS!

Q. Is anti-bacterial soap a good defense against disease?

We have mixed feelings about this kind of soap. A Columbia School of Nursing study, funded by the National Institutes of Health, found that anti-bacterial soap, when used for normal daily washing did not destroy more bacteria than regular soap. "We found antimicrobial or antibacterial soaps provide no added value over plain soap, " noted Elaine Larson, associate dean of research at the School of Nursing.

The Center for Disease Control, on the other hand, recently recommended anti-bacterial soaps for patient care settings such as hospitals and doctors' offices. They said that it reduces the number of infections transmit-

NEW PARENT 411: WHY EVERYONE IN THE HOUSE GETS SICK WHEN A CHILD HAS A VIRAL ILLNESS

Everyone gets sick because of what families do in their own homes. We hug, kiss, share drinks, touch door handles, touch hand towels, etc. We also wash our hands less in our homes than when we are out in public.

BOTTOM LINE: Think twice before you decide to finish what is left over on your child's plate. Is that half-eaten chicken nugget really worth it?