Here Comes the Sunscreen

“I’ll stand still while you put on my sunscreen,” said no kid ever. But with these genius hacks from experts, you will come as close as humanly possible to peaceful sun protection.

by LESLIE GOLDMAN / photograph by PRISCILLA GRAGG

SUN SAFETY can be a huge hassle when you have young kids. Applying sunscreen seems to take forever, especially the ones that are toothpaste thick. It can get in your kid’s eyes and on your clothes because the ordeal is like wrestling a crocodile. Sand + sunscreen = hell. Kids hate hats. Beaches don’t have trees. The list goes on.

But protecting children’s skin is one of the most important things we can do. The risk of skin cancer starts to accumulate early on. At least five blistering sunburns before age 20 raise the risk of melanoma by 80 percent, according to a study at Brown University. “Even darker-skin-toned children get sunburns and are at risk of skin cancer when they grow up,” says Seemal P. Dasai, M.D., clinical assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Texas Southwestern. In other words, all families need not only to slather up, but also to take steps to avoid damaging UV rays.

How are you going to do all this? We’ve got your back.

MAKE A GAME OF DABBING ON SUNSCREEN AND YOUR KID WILL BE ALL SMILES TOO!
6 Tricks for Winning the Sunscreen Scuffle
Seasoned parents supply clever strategies to get your squirmier to cooperate.

→ Give her a choice. “Just as you let your little one pick which snack she wants from two healthy options, give her the choice of two types of sunscreens from brands you trust.” —Hillary Fogelson, four-time melanoma survivor and author of Pale Girl Speaks

→ Find the right pace. “If your child has autism or sensory sensitivities, you might only get one arm covered before he needs a break for a book, a show, or a favorite activity. Unscented varieties tend to work best.” —Lisa Goring, spokesperson for Autism Speaks; Manhasset, NY

→ Get aboard the sunscreen train. “Everyone lines up—siblings, cousins, friends, parents—and receives a big squirt to rub on the back and shoulders of the person in front of him. An adult checks for missed spots.” —Amada Mushro; Guelph, ON

→ Encourage silly faces. “I ask my daughter to make a puffer-fish face. It usually entertains her long enough for me to apply and smooth out the sunscreen.” —Lina Gaxsom, New York, NY

→ Sync it with snacktime. Does your child ask you for a snack every couple of hours? You’re in luck! “Pick natural breaks like those for snacks and lunch to reapply sunscreen. By doing this, you’re not taking your little one away from her fun. This strategy also gives the sunscreen time to soak in before your kid heads out of the shade.” —Becky Altman, summer-camp director; Chicago, IL

Smart Ways to Throw Shade
Your family needs extra cover, especially during the sun’s peak hours of 10 AM. to 4 PM.

At the Shore
Set up a beach umbrella in the shade, suggests Joshua Zeichner, M.D., a dermatologist at Mount Sinai Health System in New York City, and dad of two. Adjust its direction during the day to keep everyone cool. Dr. Zeichner likes Zinsser Sun Screens ($235, zinssersunscreens.com); UV-protective canopies that fold up to fit in a backpack. “Your kids will have enough space to play and be well protected,” he says. See “A Day at the Beach? We’ve Got This, Guys!” on page 36, for more ideas.

In the Car
Glass blocks UVB rays, but damaging UVA rays pass right through windows. Translucent window films screen out 99 percent of UVA rays, try those by 3M, Nexfilm, or Solar Gard. Put sunscreen on kids’ exposed skin for long car rides, and drape the lightweight IN THE STROLLER canopies that fold up to fit in a backpack. “It’s always best to avoid direct sun. For exposed skin, here’s a surprise: Sunscreen is safe! “If you think about it, zinc oxide is the main ingredient in diaper paste, so it’s fine for delicate baby skin.” —Joshua Zeichner, M.D., dermatologist

In the Stroller
Deals the lightweight 36-by-40-in. Coolibar Baby Sun Blanket SPF 50+ ($53, coolibar.com) over your little one’s exposed skin.

In the Salon
Kinetic Skincare’s sun-protective treatment, ($100, kinetic-skincare.com) uses chemical sunscreen ingredients that don’t irritate delicate skin. “My favorite sunscreens use chemical and mineral blockers.” —Dr. Zeichner

Dealing With Bugs
It’s always best to avoid sunscreen–insect repellent combos. You need to apply sunscreen more frequently than bug spray. 

Buy Our Picks!
Hover your phone’s camera to access sunscreens in our Amazon shop.
“Protective clothing can be even more effective than sunscreen,” says Samantha Conrad, M.D., a dermatologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, in Chicago. “If you see dermatologists and their families on vacation, they are under an umbrella, wearing long sleeves and a hat.” Follow their lead and you’ll need to put sunscreen just on exposed skin before you send your kids off to play in the sprinklers.

Sun apparel is labeled with a UPF (ultraviolet protection factor) indicating the amount of UV rays that can penetrate the fabric. For instance, a UPF 50 shirt allows just 1/50 of UV radiation to reach the skin. Instead of dressing your squad in regular T-shirts—which offer a UPF of 5, allowing 1/5 of the sun’s UV through even when wet—go undercover with these adorable swimsuits and accessories.

**Hats to Wear in the Water**
Every inch of brim slashes your lifetime skin-cancer risk by 10 percent, says Darrell S. Rigel, M.D., clinical professor of dermatology at NYU Langone Health, in New York City. Coolibar Kid’s Surfs Up All Sport Hat UPF 50+ combines a 3-inch front brim with a draped neck guard. $22; coolibar.com

**Rash Guard and Board Shorts**
UV Skinz’s Sun & Swim Shirt has coordinating board shorts for the ultimate stay-safe combo. The shirt’s high collar protects the neck. $27 for shirt, $23 for shorts; uvskinz.com

**Mini Sunglasses**
Look for mirrored lenses (you shouldn’t be able to see your child’s eyes) with a sticker indicating “UVA/UVB protection.” Babiators boast flexible rubber frames and impact- and shatter-resistant lenses, and if your little sunfish breaks or loses them within a year, the company will replace them for free. You’ll just pay for shipping! $20; babiators.com

**Head-Toe for Tots**
The Solumbra by Sun Precautions Toddler Swimsuit protects tots from neck to ankle with just one zip. Dr. Conrad loves that it’s 100+ SPF. $50; sunprecautions.com

**Mommy-and-Me Matching**
Long-sleeved and UPF 50, the Mott50 Mini swimsuit has a back zipper for easy on and off, thumbholes for hand protection, and a slew of adorable patterns—many with matching designs in Mom’s size. Chrissy Teigen’s a fan. $32 to $68; mott50.com

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**Dress ‘Em for Less Drama**

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**DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR SUNSCREEN BASICS?**
Here’s a quick recap from Kalyani Marathe, M.D.

- **Minimum SPF for kids:** 30
- **Timing:** Apply 15 minutes before heading outdoors and reapply every two hours. Do it hourly if your kids are in and out of the water, sweating, or toweling off.
- **How much:** 1 Tbs. for a baby or a toddler and 1 1/2 Tbs. for an older child. The average sunscreen user applies 25 to 50 percent of the suggested amount, so apply more than you think you need.
- **Who:** Children and adults of all skin tones need sunscreen. (Melanin does not protect against skin cancer.)

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