

Managing illness in child care

By Lauren Boyle

When groups of children play and learn together, illness and disease can spread from one child to another, even when the recommended hygiene and infection control practices are followed. While it can often be challenging to meet the needs of an unwell child and their family, services have a responsibility to ensure that other children, families and child care professionals are protected from infectious illnesses.

At enrolment and orientation services should talk with families about their child's general health status, and seek information about any particular medical needs the child may have. This information can be documented on the enrolment form, assisting child care professionals to understand and monitor children's daily health requirements. It is also important to develop individual health plans for children with allergies or other medical conditions such as epilepsy or asthma.

Identifying a child who is unwell

Educating child care professionals to recognise symptoms which may indicate a possible infection or serious medical illness can assist services to manage the spread of infections. It also helps to ensure that an ill child receives immediate attention so that they are made comfortable and receive medication if required. It is important to note that symptoms of illness or disease can occur in isolation or in conjunction with others.

Child care professionals should not consider themselves to be medical experts or take on the role of diagnosing an illness as this is the responsibility of medical practitioners. When in doubt, seek advice from a health care professional as soon as possible or when symptoms worsen.

Common symptoms that may indicate a possible illness include: breathing difficulties; a high temperature; loose bowel movements; vomiting; discharge from the eyes or ears and persistent, prolonged or severe coughing (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2006). Child care professionals should be vigilant in observing these and other possible signs of illness or unusual behavior in children.

Monitoring symptoms of illness

Documenting the symptoms of illness in children in care is crucial to the success of effectively monitoring the illness, especially when the condition changes or the child becomes increasingly unwell. Accurately recording information about a child's illness will assist services to provide families with important information, and it may also be used by medical practitioners to assess the severity of the illness and to make a diagnosis. To ensure consistency and accuracy in the information

provided, it is helpful for only one or two people to be responsible for the child's care and monitoring of symptoms.

If the child has transferred from school to the outside school hours care service and was unwell while at school, staff may need to check the school's records to get a clear understanding of the child's illness and to evaluate the situation.

To record information about a child's illness, a service can keep an illness register that includes the child's name, the symptoms of the illness and times these were observed, and the action taken by child care professionals to manage the child's condition. The register should also include if and when any medication was administered, for example asthma or allergy medication, and have a section for parents or guardians to sign to acknowledge that medication was administered upon collection of the child.

Services should have a clear policy and procedures in place outlining the families' responsibilities in the event that their child becomes unwell and needs to be collected from care or requires urgent medical treatment. Services must ensure that families are informed about the service's policies and procedures, and it is helpful to explain to parents how these are devised to promote the wellbeing of their own child, as well as other children and adults in the service.

Contacting families when their child becomes ill

Families should be encouraged to keep their contact details up to date. At enrolment, the service can discuss the importance of being able to reach a parent or emergency contact person at any time and inform parents of the circumstances in which they will be contacted. If a child needs to be collected from the service, any attempts to contact a parent or emergency contact person should be recorded with the time noted.

Services may consider setting guidelines regarding the number of emergency contacts required. For example, they may like to request a minimum of three emergency contact people for each child.

When on an excursion, child care professionals should ensure children's emergency contact records accompany them in the case of children becoming ill or requiring medication.

Minimising the risk of cross infection

To stop illnesses spreading, services must implement specific hygiene procedures such as handwashing, cleaning equipment and surfaces and safe food handling practices.

Immunisation is also a highly effective way to minimise the risk of cross infection, and services should keep a current record of each child's immunisation status. While immunisation is not compulsory for attendance at child care, a child who is not immunised against a certain disease will need to be excluded from the service if an outbreak of that disease occurs.

Exclusion of children with infectious diseases from the service significantly reduces the risk of cross infection. To develop exclusion guidelines for use in child care services, child care professionals may consider following the national exclusion guidelines provided by either the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) or their state/territory health department. These guidelines should be provided to families to help them to understand when their child can return to care after an illness, and why they need to be excluded when they are either contagious or too unwell to attend care.

Services need to be committed to maintaining the best possible hygiene standards through:

- thorough handwashing
- implementing exclusion guidelines which minimise the risk of cross infection
- regular cleaning of surfaces and equipment
- hygienic food handling practices

Staff can also encourage children's involvement in controlling infection by:

- role modeling hygienic practice to children
- setting and reinforcing rules for hygiene with children
- inviting children to have input to the development of the service's policies and procedures for controlling infection
- encouraging children to follow appropriate hygiene practices such as handwashing, nose blowing, safe food handling and cleaning up.

Conclusion

Services and families may find it challenging to balance children's illnesses and the child care needs of families. However, services must work to minimise the spread of infectious illnesses, and families should be aware that their child may need to be kept away from the service at times due to illness. It is important that the primary concern of both child care professionals and families at all times is the wellbeing and outcomes for children ■

Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 6.2 - 6.4

References and further reading

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For more information on OSHCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au