

Illness in Child Care

By Sonja Tansey

Children in child care come into contact with many other children and adults and in this environment they can contract infectious illnesses. Quality Assurance standards require child care services to implement specific strategies to minimise the spread of infectious illnesses. However, it is not possible to prevent the spread of all illnesses or diseases in child care. You are likely at some point to need to keep your child away from child care due to illness.

It can be difficult for families to know when their child is sick enough to need to stay home from child care. Families can experience problems when trying to take time off work or study to care for an ill child at home. Obtaining paid leave from work and facing negative attitudes about leave in the workplace can cause stress for families. They can also experience guilt when taking time off work or study to care for a sick child or when they send a child to care who is not well.

However, it is important that families maintain a focus not only on the wellbeing of their own child, but also upon the wellbeing of other children and the child care professionals in the service. Although it can be difficult for working families to care for ill children, in the interests of all children's health, it is important that they follow their service's policy for the exclusion of ill children.

Why do children sometimes become ill when they are in child care?

Children in child care come into contact with more children and adults than they do in their own home environment. Children in child care are therefore exposed to a larger number of infectious illnesses at a time when their immunity is still developing. When children first start child care they are more susceptible to picking up illnesses as they are exposed to a range of infections that they are not yet immune to.

To promote children's healthy growth and development, child care professionals nurture children and encourage them to play and explore their environment. Through play, nurture and exploration children in child care have close physical contact with others and their environment. Therefore children can be exposed to infectious illnesses through physical contact with other children, adults, toys and surfaces or through airborne droplets from coughing or sneezing.

Why should my child be excluded from care when they are ill?

Health and licensing authorities recommend, and in some cases require, child care services to exclude ill children from care. For example, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) provides child care services with guidelines for the exclusion of children with specific illnesses such as influenza, meningococcal infection and measles.

Child care services are also required to inform their state or territory health authority if a child at the service has a notifiable disease. A notifiable disease is an infectious disease that must be reported to health authorities if it is contracted by a child attending child care.



Child care services work to prevent the spread of illness by minimising the transmission of infectious disease from one person to another. Services will usually have a policy for the exclusion of sick children that is available for families to read. To stop illnesses spreading, services implement specific hygiene procedures such as hand washing, cleaning toys and sanitising surfaces. They also encourage families to immunise their children.

All children, staff and families at the child care service benefit from the practice of excluding ill children. Unwell children require additional individual comfort and attention that is difficult to provide in a child care environment. Ill children are also better able to recover if they can rest and be cared for at home. In addition, the infection is less likely to spread to other children, families and child care professionals.

How can I protect my child from becoming ill in child care?

Immunisation is the most effective way to prevent some serious childhood illnesses. Child care services should have readily available information for families on child immunisation. Families can also contact their local doctor or find out about the Australian Government's *Immunise Australia Program* by visiting the following website: www.immunise.health.gov.au



Upon enrolment, child care services usually ask families to provide a copy of their child's immunisation record. If a vaccine preventable disease occurs in a child care service, families will be asked to exclude non-immunised children from care. This protects the non-immunised child and helps to prevent the further spread of infection.

How do I know if my child is not well enough to go to child care?

A child should not attend child care if they have an infectious illness. As a general rule children should also not attend care if they have an illness that prevents them from comfortably participating in activities at the service.

Sometimes children have ongoing medical needs that can be accommodated in the child care service such as asthma or anaphylaxis. In these situations, services usually document the child's general health and behaviour status at enrolment, in consultation with the family. This helps child care staff to know what is 'normal' health and behaviour for children with additional health needs.

What happens if my child gets ill at the child care service?

Child care professionals are not medical practitioners and are not able to diagnose whether or not a child has an infectious illness. However, if an infectious illness is suspected, the child care service may ask the family to collect their child from care as soon as possible or not to bring the child to child care. They may also ask the family to seek medical advice. Sometimes the service will request that the family obtains a medical certificate stating that the child is no longer infectious before they allow the child to return to the service.

What if my child needs medication at child care?

When children are ill they may require medication to help manage symptoms or stop infection. Sometimes over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol can hide the symptoms of an infectious illness. Children should not be sent to child care while they still have an infectious illness, even if medication is suppressing the symptoms. While there may be some circumstances in which a child care service may be prepared to administer over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol, many services will have a policy stating that this is not acceptable practice. Families should discuss the medication policy with child care professionals in the service.



If a child requires medication while attending child care, a parent or legal guardian must provide the service with written authority to administer the medication. To do this, families will usually be required to complete and sign a medication form. A form will need to be completed each time a child needs to receive a new course of medication. Child care professionals have a duty of care to accurately administer medication to children, and they will require families to provide written details of the following:

- the child's name
- the name of the medication
- dosage
- method for giving the medication
- date and time the medication is to be administered
- expiry date of the medication

What illnesses will my child be excluded for?

To decide when a child needs to be excluded from child care, it is recommended that child care professionals follow the national exclusion guidelines provided by the NHMRC. For example, the recommended minimum exclusion period for a child with measles is four days after the

The following list of symptoms may assist families to identify whether their child may have an infectious illness. These symptoms can occur in isolation or in conjunction with other symptoms:

- unusual behaviour (child is cranky or less active than usual, cries more than usual, seems uncomfortable or just seems unwell)
- feverish appearance
- diarrhoea (an increase in the frequency, runniness or volume of the faeces)
- vomiting
- loss of appetite
- conjunctivitis (tears, eyelid lining is red, irritated eyes, followed by swelling and discharge of pus from eyes)
- unusual spots or rashes
- patch of infected skin (crusty skin or discharging yellow area of skin)
- grey or very pale faeces
- unusually dark, tea-coloured urine
- yellowish skin or eyes
- sore throat or difficulty in swallowing
- headache, stiff neck
- severe, persistent or prolonged coughing (child goes red or blue in the face, and makes a high pitched croupy or whooping sound after coughing)
- frequent scratching of the scalp or skin
- breathing trouble (particularly in babies under six months old)

National Health and Medical Research Council

onset of the rash. The NHMRC also recommends that "immunised and immune contacts are not excluded. Non-immunised contacts of a case are to be excluded from child care until 14 days after the first day of appearance of rash..."

For a full list of NHMRC recommended exclusion periods for a wide range of childhood illnesses, families can download a copy of *Staying Healthy in Child Care. Preventing Infectious Diseases in Child Care* (4th edition) from: www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/_files/ch43.pdf

Do I still have to pay for child care when my child is absent?

When children do not attend child care due to illness, it is usual practice for services to charge the normal attendance fee. This is generally because child care services need to plan their budget according to a certain occupancy or usage rate over a set time period. The loss of fees due to unexpected absences can impact significantly upon the service's operation. If a family has difficulty paying the fee they should discuss this with the child care service director or operator.

Conclusion

At times families may find balancing the challenges of children's illnesses and child care difficult and frustrating. This can be particularly difficult where children have only recently started child care and are still settling, and parents are settling into work or study. However, while child care services must work to minimise the spread of infectious illnesses, families should be aware that their child will need to be kept out of the service at times due to illness. It is important that both child care professionals and families primary concern at all times is the wellbeing of and quality of outcomes for children ■

References and further reading

- Centre for Community Health. (2005). *An Information Sheet for Parents. Reducing Infectious Disease*. Retrieved 23 January 2008 from http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/econnections/CCH_P_May2005_English.pdf
- National Childcare Accreditation Council. (n.d.) *Policy Template: Medication Policy*. Retrieved 23 January 2008 from www.ncac.gov.au/policy_development/policy_templates.html
- National Health and Medical Research Council. (2006). *Staying Healthy in Child Care. Preventing Infectious Diseases in Child Care (4th edition)*.

Useful websites

- National Health and Medical Research Council: www.nhmrc.gov.au
- National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education (United States website): www.healthykids.us



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

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