

Illness in child care services

Children come into contact with many other children and adults in an early education and care service environment, which can result in the contracting of infectious illnesses. Quality standards require these services to put specific strategies into action to minimise the spread of infectious illnesses.

Remember: While every reasonable effort is taken to minimise the spread of illness, it is not possible to prevent the spread of all illnesses or diseases in early education and care services. At some point you may need to keep your child away from your service due to illness.

It can be difficult for families to know when their child is sick enough to need to stay at home. Taking time off work or study to care for an ill child at home can sometimes be challenging, so it is important to plan and identify care options in the event that your child is not well enough to attend the service. Getting paid leave from work and facing negative attitudes about leave in the workplace can sometimes cause stress for families.

Services are required to maintain a focus not only on the wellbeing of your child, but also on the wellbeing of other children and the staff in the service. Having some options identified and a plan about how your family will care for ill children will minimise the difficulties, especially for working families. It is important staff follow their service's policy for the exclusion of ill children, in the interests of all children's health.



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

Children are more susceptible to picking up illnesses when they first start child care because they come into contact with more people than they do in their own homes and are exposed to a range of infections they may not yet be immune to.

To promote children's healthy growth, learning and development, staff 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 illness such as coughing or sneezing.

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

Health and regulating authorities recommend, and in some cases require early education and care services to exclude ill children from the service. Services work to prevent the spread of illness by minimising the transmission of infectious disease from one person to another. They will usually have a policy for the exclusion of sick children that is available for families to read. To reduce the likelihood of illnesses spreading, services have specific hygiene procedures in place such as hand washing, cleaning toys and sanitising surfaces.

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

How can I protect my child from becoming ill at their service?

Immunisation is the most effective way to prevent some serious childhood illness. Many education and care services require children to be fully immunised in order to enrol - unless this is not possible due to medical reasons. 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.

Early education and 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 www.immunise.health.gov.au

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

A child should not attend their early education and care service 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 taken care of at the 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 staff to know what is 'normal' health and behaviour for children with additional health needs.

What happens if my child gets ill at their service?

Early education and care service staff 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 service may ask the family to come and collect their child as soon as possible or not to bring the child in at all. Sometimes the service will request the family seek medical advice and get a medical certificate confirming the child is no longer infectious, before they allow the child to return to the service.

What if my child needs medication?

Some children will need to take medication on an ongoing basis to treat an illness or condition, such as asthma. When children are ill they may also need medication to help manage symptoms or promote recovery. Sometimes over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol can hide the symptoms of an infectious illness; however children who have an infectious illness may need medical attention and additional care and should not attend the service. It is important to talk to staff about the service's policies on medication and to discuss your child's medical needs. It is important to also note that many services have a policy not to administer over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol, without a doctor's instructions.