

When To Keep Kids At Home
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Living Well
A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Once upon a time, really not all that long ago, it was so easy. Mothers, most of them, anyway, were at home during the day. If a child was deemed too sick to go to school, Mom was there to make sure he stayed warm, to fix a bowl of chicken noodle soup and lots of orange juice, take his temperature every few hours, and generally do a fine job of home nursing. If his symptoms were at all worrying, she'd have him bundled up, into the car and off to the doctor's office. Oh, one more thing. Doctors made house calls.

Today, it's so much more complicated. For two working parents and for single parents, a child waking up sick can throw a wrench into an otherwise well-oiled family machine. Grandmas always used to be available in a pinch, but now Grandma may live halfway across the country.

So chaos reigns when a child gets sick—and they all do. The Center for Disease Control says that the average child has an astonishing six to 12 illnesses a year, counting both mild and severe. And even a minor bout of a contagious illness may require that the child stay at home to avoid spreading whatever he has to the rest of his classmates.

Fran Chapell, Director of the Canaan Child Care Center, gives Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association (SVNA) a call if a child arrives not feeling well but not falling into the center's basic health guidelines for attendance. SVNA consults with the Canaan Center as well as the Housatonic Day Care Center and the Falls Village Day Care Center. "Marilyn (Marilyn Joseph, SVNA's Executive Director) is our guide," Chapell said. "If we get something unusual we call her." If necessary, Joseph comes to the center to see the child. She may decide that the child is well enough to stay or call the parents to take him home.

What Chapell finds most distressing is a child arriving at the center with what is clearly a really bad cold. Occasionally, too, she said, parents will give a child with a fever a Tylenol before arriving at day care. By midday, the medication has worn off, the fever is back and parents have to be called. During those morning hours, the entire group has been exposed to whatever is causing the fever.

What Chapell most appreciates are parents who call ahead if their child isn't feeling well so that they can discuss whether the child is well enough to come to day care.

Sick Enough?

So just how sick is sick enough to stay home from school or daycare?

Fever The number to watch for here is 101 degrees or higher. With a fever that high, an infection is probably getting a foothold, even in the absence of other symptoms. If the thermometer doesn't quite get to 101, though, your judgement comes into play. Does your child look sick or act sick? Every parent is the best judge of what is normal for his or her child

Tummy Troubles A single episode of vomiting could be due to any number of things, but if it happens two or more times the child should stay at home. Diarrhea could mean a virus and the child should stay at home and drink lots of fluids. If blood is present or if diarrhea is accompanied by fever, abdominal pain or vomiting you may be dealing with a bacterial infection, and it's time to see the doctor.

Sore Throat A mild sore throat need not keep a child at home, but a severe sore throat, could be strep throat, especially if the child also has an upset stomach and headache. Keep her at home and consult a doctor. A test can determine if it is strep, which will require antibiotics.

Cough Coughs can spread an infection. But if the cough is mild, it's probably okay to go to school. If coughing interrupts the child's sleep, however, she's going to be too tired to do well in school the next day. A bad cough, should keep a child at home. It could be due to a severe cold, flu, bronchitis or pneumonia. Usually, though, a cough will go away on its own, and if the child is clearly feeling better, it's not necessary to stay at home until the cough is completely gone.

Colds and Sniffles If there's no fever and the child isn't feeling too badly, it should be okay to go to school, where, probably, the child caught the cold in the first place.

Rash If the rash spreads or is itchy or scaly, a trip to the doctor is called for. A rash can signal one of several possibilities, among them impetigo, a highly contagious bacterial infection that requires antibiotics.

Earache Middle ear infections can be very painful, although some children experience little or no discomfort at all. A child in pain is not going to perform well in school and should stay home. If the ear infection is not accompanied by a cold and the child feels well, however, it's off to school. Painful or not, however, an ear infection calls for a doctor's immediate attention.

Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye) Pink eye is highly contagious, but, as it is usually caused by a virus, will not respond to antibiotics. Bacterial conjunctivitis, will respond, however, and your doctor can tell you which is which. Your child's day care center or school may require a doctor's note when the child returns after recovering from pink eye or from a rash.

The opening of school is the perfect time to remind children to wash their hands thoroughly with lots of soap and water at every opportunity. And it's not a bad idea to

carry hand sanitizer in their backpacks and use it. Remind them, also, to cover their mouths when coughing or sneezing and to blow their noses into tissues.

Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association offers sick child care as well as home nursing and hospice care to residents throughout the Northwest Corner.