

Keeping your child healthy in an early childhood program

This issue is a challenge for all families today, particularly working families who don't have the option of unlimited time off to stay home with a sick child.

Fortunately there are a few things parents can do when sending their children to a provider for care.

1 Start at home and make sure your child is getting adequate rest, physical activity, a healthy diet, and that they practice good self-help and cleanliness habits.

Sleep & physical activity: Adequate rest means getting to bed at a reasonable hour to ensure a good night's sleep. Experts say that most children need at least 10 hours of sleep a night. Create and stick to a routine that will help your child wind down in the evening and set a time for lights to be out. Reading is obviously the most beneficial activity for the children and allows you to give your child a few minutes of your undivided attention between cleaning up after supper and starting the next load of laundry! Once you have established the routine, stick to it whenever possible so that your child knows what to expect and will look forward to the routine. To help your child get to sleep and stay asleep, see that they have opportunities for physical activities outside during the day. Hopefully this is part of your provider's curriculum and/or schedule, but it is up to you, as the parents to create and offer these opportunities when the children are at home.

Diet: Try limiting the quantity of fats, sugar and total caloric intake. Offer your children lots of whole grains foods and at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day (If your child does not drink a lot of milk, make sure he or she is getting adequate calcium through other dairy products or a supplement). Limit juice to 100% juice drinks and limit the quantity given each day to 15 to 20 ounces. Other juice drinks do not contain enough vitamins and minerals to be of any real nutritional value and are usually full of sugar and empty calories. Offer water throughout the day.

Good self-help and cleanliness habits: If your child takes a blanket or pillow to the child care setting for rest time, make sure that they come home every week to be washed and sanitized. Make sure that at home you and your children wash hands frequently during the day - before & after eating, after using the bathroom, blowing a nose, after playing outdoors. Make sure that your school-age children wash their hands the minute they get in your door when coming from school, (school-age children inadvertently bring new germs into the home). Wash and sanitize surfaces at home such as counters, sinks and changing tables/toilets. Consider washing and sanitizing on a weekly basis any toys that your own or visiting children frequently place in their mouths. Also consider washing and sanitizing toys, mats, chairs and tables on a weekly basis.

2 Talk to your provider. If you do not have a copy of your child care's illness policy, ask them for a copy. Then observe the setting during drop off and pick up to see for yourself if they follow through with it. Below is a list of questions to ask your provider if

their policies are unclear or if they do not have an illness policy:

- Under what conditions can a child stay, under what conditions does a parent need to arrange to have their child picked up?
- What happens if a parent can't pick up their child?
- Is there a separate place that your child can rest quietly, but still be safely supervised by an adult?

Ask your provider about the preventative measures they take to stop the spread of germs and illness. The following should be standard practice with in the child care setting:

- Do the children and adults wash their hands frequently during the day - before & after eating, after using the bathroom, blowing a nose, playing with sand, water or play dough and after playing outdoors?
- Do school-age children wash their hands when entering the building when coming from school?
- How frequently are toys, mats, chairs and tables washed and sanitized?
- Is there time in the daily schedule for rest and quiet time (this is required in state-licensed facility)?
- Are the children adequately separated at rest time?

3 If your child is sick in the morning, do not send him or her to your caregiver. It is unfair to your child, their care givers and the other families that attend the child care. In the worst case scenario, your sick child could cause your caregiver to become ill. This will affect all families who attend the child care since that care giver may not be able to work at all.

Create a plan. It is absolutely necessary that parents have a plan in place to take care of their children should they become ill.

Leaving work or working from home. You need to decide which parent can stay home or leave work if necessary to accommodate your sick child's needs.

Alternative pick up procedures. Arrange for a neighbor, friend or relative to be available if you or your partner cannot stay home or pick up a sick child from the care giver's.

Family friendly work policies. Talk to your employer and find out how flexible they can be, if and when you have a sick child. Many times employers will allow you to work from home rather than lose you for the entire workday.

Creating an illness plan will make illness a less traumatic and stressful situation for everyone - especially your sick child. Following these guidelines may help everyone stay healthy and happy by using some common sense and practical measures to prevent the spread of illness!

Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensure that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; building public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family. www.earlylearningnh.org