



Young children and winter ailments: Stay home or carry on as normal?

Why do young children get poorly?

Young children are particularly prone to common viruses because their immune systems are not yet fully developed. That said, even knowing this, it can sometimes feel like it is just one thing after another during your child's early years.

Despite effective measures in place to combat life threatening illnesses, including measles, typhoid and tuberculosis, there are many common childhood ailments that most children will contract and recover from fully.

However, the same illness can also make some children very poorly, particularly those who are vulnerable due to underlying health conditions, so we must never be complacent.

Most common childhood infections are relatively minor, and very difficult to avoid. Children are notorious super-spreaders: they play in close proximity, making it easy for germs to transfer from one host to the next.

The developing immune system

When a child is exposed to a virus for the first time, the immune response is not as effective as the next time they are infected by the same virus. This is why a young child who has not had much 'infection experience' is more vulnerable to illness.

With age and time, more viruses are recognised and dealt with by the immune system. This is the reason why children do not tend to pick up measles or chickenpox twice.

Addressing the question of the common cold

As winter sets in, adults and children will probably catch the common cold. On average, an adult will have two to three colds per year, with children having at least twice as many.

Parents and carers everywhere will be telling children to cover their mouths, stop wiping their nose on their sleeve, and to put that dirty tissue in the bin. Meanwhile those with younger children will likely find themselves wiping noses dozens of times a day in a losing battle against the endless stream of mucus that a cold generates.

The general consensus with regard to children attending early years settings with a cold is that providing they are well enough and do not have a fever – i.e. a temperature over 38°C – they should be fine to attend and take part in all activities as usual. Some parents and carers worry about their child taking part in outdoor activities when they have a cold, but in fact, fresh air and exercise is always beneficial even on the coldest of days, unless a child has an underlying health condition.

Whether a child can attend their early years settings is influenced by the following:

Is your child well enough to be here?

It might not be immediately obvious that your child has a specific illness, so it's a good idea to check what is going round. Your early years provider will be able to tell you if other children are off with an infectious illness such as chickenpox or norovirus, and should offer you information about the signs and symptoms

to look out for, as well as the important exclusion times that they must adhere to. If you think that your child is well enough to attend their early years setting, do check with their key person when you arrive and be prepared to take them home again if there is any chance that they are suffering from an infectious illness. Remember, a child's health can deteriorate rapidly during the day. They may have bounced energetically out of the house at 8.30am only to be completely wiped out by 11am!

Early educators are not medically trained to make a diagnosis; they can only respond to the symptoms they can see, and the guidance they follow. A regular source of friction between parents/carers and providers happens when parents are told: "You cannot bring your child back until the exclusion period is up", or worse still, "Sorry we can't give you a refund for the days they are off."

Early years providers are truly sympathetic to the plight of parents when it comes to having to send children home. Many are parents themselves and fully understand the challenges of having to call your boss to ask for immediate time off.

It may be the worst possible time for you to take time off work, but exceptions cannot be made. A busy nursery environment is not ideal for a poorly child. Educators will always do their best to make sure that your child's day to day needs are met, but when they are poorly, they need care that the setting is not set up to provide and one to one attention that it is not possible to give.

It is also important to remember that working parents have rights such as dependents' leave or unpaid parental leave – leading charity Working Families has more information on this, available [here](#).

It's important to remember that you know your child better than anyone. If you are concerned about your child's health, seek advice from NHS 111, or your GP. If you are concerned that your child is seriously ill and their condition is deteriorating call 999 or take them immediately to your nearest emergency department.



What does the guidance say?

Every registered early years education and childcare provider has to meet the requirements set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Failure to do so can result in the regulatory body taking enforcement action against them.

With regard to poorly children, the EYFS states: 'They must have a procedure, discussed with parents and/or carers, for responding to children who are ill or infectious, take necessary steps to prevent the spread of infection and take appropriate action when children are ill.'

They must also adhere to the guidance issued by the government that sets out the symptoms of common infectious diseases and the recommended exclusion times when exclusion is required.