



Should they be off school?

It's a dilemma faced by many parents: when children say they're sick and want to stay home

It's 8.30 on a typically busy weekday morning. You have a big presentation to deliver at work, breakfast is gulped down and as the kids get dressed for school one child starts complaining: "I feel sick."

You were just about to bolt out the door — is there a quick way to assess the extent of illness and still drop the children at school and get to work on time?

Invariably no, according to school health nurse Joanna Simpson, who has been a working mother for 12 years, the past eight as the clinical nurse at Christ Church Grammar School.

Ms Simpson's advice is clear: "There is no quick-fix pill. Stop and have a conversation with your child and take the time to know what's going on with them even if that means being 10 minutes late for work."

She said you knew your own child really well and if they looked terrible, then it was a given that they were unwell and would need to stay home from school. For these instances all working parents must have established a good back-up plan. Whether that's one parent taking time off from work or willing and available family and friends.

Ms Simpson's advice is if they

look OK, then backtrack 24 to 48 hours to see if you can pinpoint the problem.

Did they eat dinner last night and breakfast this morning? Did they sleep well? Or could they be concerned about something that's occurring at home like the pet being unwell or is another family member in difficulty?

She said if a child spoke of pain it was not always a physical problem, they just had no other way to describe it.

Ms Simpson said Monday morning was typically busy at her school health centre with children who complained of tummy aches and headaches but who on inquiry were found to have had very busy and social weekends and were exhausted. They'd not had enough rest or sleep.

She suggests parents take a look — with their child — at the child's timetable for the day to see if there is anything within that day that could be concerning them. Do they have sport or an assessment to give them cause for anxiety? And ask what went on the last day at school?

"If you can identify a reason why they don't want to go to school, then talk about it and, most importantly, listen to them. Ultimately, you may have to tell them to face the reality and push through but they have faced their anxieties along with their parent," Ms Simpson said.

"You may end up being an hour late into work but you have reduced a lot of anxiety," she said.

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners chair of WA faculty Frank Jones said to look at any changes in behaviour such as breathing and colour.

If a child was happy and alert, then they probably had no major issues, he said.

But if they were limp or "rag doll-like", unresponsive or not looking at you as you were doing

things, crying weakly or breathing harder than usual — you needed to act quickly and seek medical advice. If they had persistent symptoms such as a sore throat, ear aches, abdominal pain or a low grade fever, he advised keeping them home and visiting the GP.

When they were happy, playful and regaining their appetite, then they were on the mend and should be OK to return to school.

He said children must be excluded from school for illnesses including mumps, chicken pox and impetigo which is a skin infection, however, he said immunisation had significantly decreased the incidence of many of these diseases. Vaccinating your child was the best prevention against illness.

The simple things that our mothers and grandmothers taught us still made all the difference in keeping children well, according to Ms Simpson.

Everything we did to our bodies made a difference to our health, she said.

Every child needed nine hours of sleep each night, to eat healthily and have proper meals.

"When we are asleep, our body is carrying out essential maintenance and if children are missing an hour or two of sleep over consecutive nights, they are missing out on that maintenance and they will get sick," she said.

Ms Simpson said to ensure your child was drinking enough water because half of all visits to the Christ Church health centre related to dehydration.

At this time of the year, a water bottle should be coming home from school empty and it should have been refilled throughout the day.

And a good handwashing technique using soap and water was the biggest single defence against common illnesses such as coughs, colds and gastro, she said.



Single mum Kelly Horton — a team manager with local health insurance group HBF — struggles with her internal guilt when she gets a call from school to say her daughter Maddison is ill.

But HBF always insists that the mother should be with her daughter as the child's welfare comes first.

"They just say go and they are always asking how she is," said Ms Horton who has worked for HBF for two years since migrating to Australia from the US.

Ms Horton praised HBF's family-friendly policies and actions that have allowed her to be with her daughter when she's needed.

This was particularly helpful in the beginning of her employment when Ms Horton had no family or friends in Perth available as backup and last year when Maddison was found to have hearing difficulties in kindergarten. She had to go into hospital for surgery to have grommets inserted.

HBF also allowed Ms Horton to change her schedule to have a rostered day off every month, allowing her to drop Maddison at school then pick her up at the end of the day.

She said it was very different to when she worked in insurance in the United States. Here we have lots of working mums who have flexible arrangements so they can be there for their kids. HBF offers a range of paid leave provisions in addition to standard personal leave in recognition of employee health and family issues, including up to 13 days paid carer's leave when an immediate family member was ill, injured or in an emergency situation.

Employees also have the option to purchase extra annual leave hours above their regular allowance.

OPTIONS WHEN KIDS ARE SICK

The Department of Commerce says all employees are entitled to take full or part days of carer's leave when their children are ill. Paid leave days are deducted from your sick leave entitlement if you need to care for a family member who is sick or injured.

If you have used all of your sick days, or if you are a casual and have no sick leave, you may take two days of unpaid carer's leave for each occasion. Your boss may request reasonable proof of why you need the leave like a medical certificate or another form of evidence.

Most employment agreements, awards and contracts already have scope for you and the boss to agree on arrangements to help you manage family obligations such as caring for sick kids.

The following are examples of arrangements that help business retain staff and help parents:

- A workplace family room
- Variable start and finish times
- Allowing employees to choose rosters that suit them wherever possible
- Access to a telephone for emergencies
- Make-up time — staff can attend to personal matters and make up additional hours later

- Annual leave being taken in single days
- Job share
- Working from home
- Part-time work
- Purchasing additional annual leave each year (great for covering school holidays)

For more information:

- www.worklife.wa.gov.au
- www.fairwork.gov.au
- www.eowa.gov.au


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