



Children with Special Needs



Children with developmental disabilities, chronic illness or weak immune systems warrant special consideration either because they are unusually susceptible to infection or because they may infect other children.

1. Children with Developmental Disabilities

In general, children with developmental disabilities are not particularly vulnerable to infection and require no special precautions or procedures. A few categories of disabilities are associated with higher rates of infection, however, such as children with spina bifida, cerebral palsy or Down syndrome.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects individuals with disabilities and requires that every effort be made to reasonably accommodate disabilities. Child care providers are expected to modify their basic policies, practices and procedures to make reasonable accommodation to include children with disabilities in their programs. In most cases, such accommodation is compatible with a safe and healthy environment from which all the children in the child care setting can benefit.

Child care providers must offer services in the most natural setting appropriate to the needs of the individual. In addition to making physical changes such as installing ramps, wide doors and restrooms that can accommodate children in wheel chairs, you may need to provide for a child's special physical, emotional or psychological needs. Other special needs may include assistance in feeding, following special dietary requirements, giving medicines and/or performing medical procedures, and ensuring that special equipment is functional or is used properly. There is help available through many different programs to assist providers in properly caring for children with special needs.

Before you admit a child with developmental disabilities, make sure that you can comfortably answer the following questions:

1. Does the child's disability require more care than you are reasonably able to provide?
2. Do you have the skills and abilities needed to perform medical or other duties required for the child's care, or can you readily acquire those skills?
3. Is your child care program equipped to meet the health and safety needs of this child?
4. Is the extra time you will need to devote to taking care of this child more than you can handle without putting the other children in your care at increased risk for illness or injury, or without causing you to neglect their needs?

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that as a provider responsible for all the children in your care, you should ensure that the extra demands on your time to care for a child with special needs are supported with additional resources, including help from experts. You should work with the child's parents and health care professionals to make sure that you have the support you need.

Many child care providers are concerned that certain infections acquired before or around the time of birth (*e.g.*, rubella, CMV, herpes simplex, hepatitis, and AIDS) may persist and be spread to other children or staff members. In some cases, these congenital infections pose a very small risk to others, and with proper precautions, affected children may safely participate in most child care or educational programs. In other cases, special precautions are warranted.

Handout #22

2. Children with Chronic Illness

Children with chronic illnesses, weakness or malnutrition are particularly vulnerable to infection. For example, infants who were premature, children who have chronic lung disease and children with cystic fibrosis frequently have a higher than average incidence of respiratory infections. Similarly, children with congenital heart disease may have unusual difficulty with some respiratory viruses. Children with diseases or structural abnormalities of the urinary tract are highly vulnerable to infections of the bladder and kidneys. Although it is not always possible to prevent these diseases, providers should be alert to the symptoms of infection and notify the child's parents and/or health care provider if they occur. Once treatment is initiated, these children should be able to participate in regular group care activities.

3. Children with Weak Immune Systems

Certain diseases or treatments can lower the body's natural defenses against infection. AIDS, cancer of the blood and some other diseases of the immune system significantly change the body's ability to fight infection, allowing even common organisms to quickly become life threatening. In children with previously normal immune systems, some drugs that are used to treat chronic conditions (*e.g.*, steroids) suppress the body's ability to fight infection. Drugs used to prevent rejection of organ transplants or to temper the body's attack on its own organs can also interfere with the normal immune response. In a child with cancer, both the disease itself and the drugs used to treat it inhibit the body's defense mechanisms.

Children with diseases or treatments that affect the immune system may need to be isolated from other children during periods of particular sensitivity. Their health care providers may prescribe special precautions regarding limited exposure to infection, particularly to chickenpox, since this disease can kill individuals with suppressed immunity. Keep in mind that vaccines with live viruses such as measles, rubella, chickenpox and polio (OPV) are not recommended for people with known weak immune systems.

Despite the risks of spreading or getting infections, children in these special population groups need to have opportunities for socialization that are as normal as possible. With care and planning, the majority of these children can be safely integrated into child care and school settings. Administrators, teachers and child care providers should work closely with parents and health care providers to establish a safe environment for these children, their peers and staff members who care for them.