



Communicating about Illness in Child Care

Parents are the primary teachers and role models for young children. When parents are asked what is the most important thing they look for when seeking child care, a healthy and safe environment is at the top of the list. With this in mind, child care providers must include parents in their efforts to create healthy environments and teach healthy habits to the children in their child care program.

The child care providers enrolled in the health and safety class may be new providers, or experienced providers who are taking the course for the first time or repeating the class to refresh their knowledge and assure they are up-to-date. Whatever their knowledge level, they should communicate all health and safety messages in the curriculum to parents.

There are several important times and methods for communicating with parents, so please be sure these are discussed throughout the module:

- Communicate without judgement: do not criticize anyone's parenting skills.
- Review all health and safety policies prior to enrolling a child. The health and safety of their children is a top priority for parents, so this review will reassure them that the provider will be working to promote the well-being of the children in their care.
- Communicate any changes in health and safety policies at parent meetings, by written notice in the primary language of the parent (when possible), and informally as you greet the parents at the beginning and end of the day.
- Communicate new knowledge gained on health and safety issues in newsletters, notes, handouts, posted information—any method you can think of that will reach a particular parent group.

All of the steps above will demonstrate to the parents that the child care provider is working in the best interest of the children in their care.

Communication with the Child Care Health Consultant

Since few child care staff are trained as health professionals, each child care program should have access to a child care health consultant who can provide consultation and technical assistance on child health issues. This consultant should have expertise in child health and development, knowledge about the special needs of children in out-of-home child care settings, and the ability to link with public health resources.

The child care health consultant's basic function is to enhance the quality of child care programs by promoting optimal health and safety standards. The health consultant should seek to establish a relationship with child care providers; identify, implement, and evaluate strategies to achieve quality child care; establish basic health and safety operational guidelines and plans for the child care program and provider; and serve in a liaison capacity to other health professionals and community organizations. The child care health consultant service can range from providing information over the telephone to more extensive services on-site. The health consultant must work closely with the local public health and child care resource and referral agencies.

The child care health consultant can:

- Underscore the importance of a primary health care provider to serve as the "medical home" for each child.
- Link staff, families, and children with community health resources.
- Ensure a system for communication among the child care provider, parent, and primary health care provider and consult when health issues arise.

- Perform on-site assessments of the child care environment and/or program operations.
- Assist child care providers in developing general policy statements and an annual plan for the child care program (e.g. management of infectious diseases, fevers, use of medications, exclusion policies, injury prevention and nutrition guidelines).
- Provide telephone consultation to child care providers as health and safety issues arise concerning specific policies and procedures.
- Help child care providers obtain, understand, and use information about the health status of individual children and staff.
- Educate children, their families, and child care providers about child development, mental and physical health, safety, nutrition, and oral health issues.
- Help identify and implement health and safety improvement plans.
- Educate and collaborate with licensing staff and policy makers to improve regulations, inspections, resources, and policies that promote inclusive, safe and healthy child care.

Communication with the Health Care Provider

Most child care programs communicate with the health care provider through the parent. If a child appears sick, you can ask the parent to take the child to a health care provider. To communicate your concerns, send along a “Form for Communication with the Health Care Provider” (Appendix B), develop your own form or just write a simple note. The purpose of your communication is to share your specific observations about a child (and perhaps some information about your program) and to get an opinion about the child’s condition, as well as recommendations on when a child can return to care.

Usually confidentiality limits your talking directly to a child’s doctor or clinic. So if you want specific information about a child’s acute or chronic condition, you must get written authorization to do so (see “Sample Authorization Form for Release of Medical Information,” Appendix B).

Before you call, summarize your concerns and jot down the questions you want answered. While you may have opinions about what is wrong or what should be done, it is often useful to first describe what you have observed and listen to the health care provider’s opinion. It can be helpful to repeat back your understanding of any recommendations and, if there is disagreement, ask for clarification.

Parent-Provider Communication

Just as child care providers have an obligation to report when children in care are exposed to a contagious disease, parents have the same obligation to report diseases to the child care program within 24 hours of a diagnosis, even if they keep their child at home. That way, the child care provider can alert other parents to watch for signs of that illness in their children and seek medical advice when necessary. You can use the “Notice of Exposure to Contagious Disease” (Appendix B), or a notice developed by your health consultant. Use “Information on Specific Diseases” (Appendix C) to prepare the exposure notice. The confidentiality of the child should be maintained. You should not report the name of the child or other family member who is ill. When you report to your local health department, the parents of the child must be informed that you are required to report the disease and so is the health care provider. Also let them know you will be sending home exposure notices to parents but will not mention any names.

Reporting Requirements

When you know that a child has a contagious illness, you may need to take special measures so that the sickness does not spread to others. Some diseases or conditions must be reported to the local health department, child care licensing and others. Parents need to be informed that their child was exposed.

Suspected child abuse or neglect must also be reported. In California, report to Child Protective Services. Check with the local authorities in your area to identify the appropriate reporting agency. You also should inform parents of this reporting requirement.