

The following information was taken from the April 1997 edition of *Redbook*. This article was written by Beth Levine:

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Symptoms That Should Keep Kids Home from School

For every mother who has been torn between the guilt of sending a sniffling tyke to school and the chaos of totally rescheduling the day, a definite guide to making the right diagnosis.

Monday morning, 7:45

a.m.: The usual chaos reigns as my husband and I race to get ourselves and our 4-year-old son, Levi, dressed, fed, and (in Levi's case) out the door to nursery school. In the midst of the commotion, one noise rises above the others: Levi's dry cough that always lingers after a cold. "Mommy, I don't feel good," he moans. Now what? Is he really too sick to go to school?

At this exact moment all across America, mothers and fathers are asking themselves the same question. In our case, the decision soon becomes clear. Levi is back to his happy (albeit hacking) self once I remind him that gymnastics (which he hates) has been canceled this week.

But what about the times the "diagnosis" isn't so obvious? For kids who may be on the verge of illness or those who've been sick at home and you're not sure whether they're ready to return to school, pediatricians offer simple, "to send or not to send" guidelines.

1 Colds There are three reasons to keep a child with a cold home: He feels tired and needs to rest/ he has other symptoms (such as a

fever); or he's contagious to others. Because kids are most contagious at the onset of the cold when they're sneezing and their noses are running, a younger child who cannot wipe his own nose, wash his own hands, or remember to cover his mouth when he coughs should be kept home longer than an older one who can observe a little more hygiene. However, if we kept our kids out of school every time they were getting a cold, had a cold, or were getting over a cold, we might as well home-school them. Hank Bernstein, M.D., associate chief of the division of general pediatrics at Children's Hospital in Boston, offers this reality-based rule of thumb, which he uses in his own home: "If my child were perfectly healthy and sitting next to a child who had these symptoms, would I be upset?" **Should you call the doctor?** Yes, if after a week the cold gets worse, if the child is having trouble breathing, or if he develops other symptoms (like a fever), advises Dr. Bernstein.

2 Coughs If a cough keeps your child up at night, appears to get worse when her activity increases, or if she has other symptoms, such as fever, keep her

home, advises Ann Parker, M.D., assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at University of California Medical Center at San Francisco, and coauthor of *The Available Pediatrician*. "But," she says, "if the cough (even a very loud one) is just the remains of an old cold and the child feels otherwise okay, you can send her to school." **Should you call the doctor?** Yes, if your child starts feeling worse (she has trouble breathing, for example), or her fever increases.

3 Ear Infections

The colds and flus that cause ear infections are contagious, but ear infections themselves are not. Once children have seen a doctor and started medication (and rested a day), they can return to school, says Bruce Taubman, M.D., clinical associate professor of pediatrics at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and author of *Your Child's Symptoms*. **Should you call the doctor?** Yes.

4 Sore Throat If children wake up with a sore throat but have no other symptoms, they may just be feeling irritated from sleeping in a room with dry air. Give them some juice or water to see if that clears up

the discomfort, advises Dr. Parker. But if the pain persists, kids should be kept home until they've been checked by a doctor to make sure they don't have strep throat or another infection. It's hard for parents to diagnose strep themselves, doctors caution. Typical symptoms are a bright red throat and sometimes pus. "But you can look in, see nothing, and then boom, it turns into strep," warns Wayne Yankus, M.D., a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health. The only way to know for sure is by a culture; if it is positive, a child can return to school after being on antibiotics and without a fever for 24 hours. **Should you call the doctor?** Yes.

5 Fever Following an illness, children should be without a fever (100.4 degrees or less taken rectally or 98.6 degrees taken orally) for 24 hours before returning to school. In a borderline case, go by how the child looks and acts, advises Dr. Parker. "If children are running only 100 degrees, but seem pale, achy, and tired, keep them home." **Should you call the doctor?** Again, go by looks and behavior.

6 Vomiting and Diarrhea If your child is throwing up, obviously you are going to keep him home. If it occurs more than three times, don't send him back to school until he has gone 24 hours without vomiting, he feels well, and is fever-free, says Dr. Taubman. Also, if he is experiencing frequent watery, foul-smelling stools, keep him home. He needs to rest and he is contagious through hand-mouth spread. After that, guidelines change according to the child's age. Children under the age of 6 should stay home until stools are firm and all other symptoms have disappeared. Older kids can return when fever is gone, the stool frequency has returned to normal, and the child has control over his bowel movements, even if still loose. **Should you call the doctor?** Yes, if your child is both vomiting and having diarrhea, or has a severe case of either one.

7 Pinkeye A child with conjunctivitis is highly contagious and should be kept home until he has been on antibiotic eyedrops for 48 hours. Diagnosis is fairly simple: The whites of the eyes are red, there is pus discharge, and in some cases the eyelashes are matted shut. **Should you call the doctor?** Yes.

8 Head Lice and Nits The lice are the parasites, the nits are their eggs. Most schools will not allow a child back to school until the child is given the appropriate shampoo treatment and *all* the nits, dead and alive, are picked out of the child's hair. **Should you call the doctor?** Not necessary. The over-the-counter rinses are just as effective as the prescription ones, according to Dr. Taubman.

9 Rashes If children have no other symptoms of illness, and the rash is not blistery, oozing, or sore, then send them to school, says Dr. Bernstein. But be especially watchful (and hold a child out) for these common – and contagious – infections:

- **Chicken Pox** Red bumps that usually begin on the chest, abdomen, or back, then become fluid-filled within 48 hours. The child is contagious until all the spots are crusted over (about a week).
- **Impetigo** A highly contagious bacterial skin infection that starts as tiny red dots that turn into circular blisters that pop and ooze. The child can return to school after being treated with an over-the-counter topical antibiotic cream for 24 hours. **Should you call the doctor?** Yes, for any rash that doesn't seem to be improving or that is spreading or one that's accompanied by other symptoms (such as a fever).

10 Sprained Ankle Keep kids home with the ankle elevated and iced for 24 to 48 hours, until they can comfortably

walk on it again, says Dr. Yankus. **Should you call the doctor?** Yes, especially if you suspect a fracture: The ankle will stay very swollen, bruised, and painful (your child may refuse to walk on it), even after a day of elevation and ice.

There's also an eleventh reason to keep kids home: a Mental Health Day. "Kids get tired and overwhelmed. Instead of making them lobby for a day off or feign illness, tell them that on a specific day, you think it's important for both of you to go to the zoo or a museum," suggests Dr. Parker.

Uninterrupted time for you and your child just to hang out – free from stress and deadlines? It's the best medicine a doctor could order.

Really sick or just great acting?

Some mornings all of a parent's diagnostic skills are tested by a child who may just be trying to dodge school. Some clues on how to tell, from pediatrician William Sears, M.D., author of *The Baby Book*:

- **The Circle Test** Your child makes broad circle signs over her head or stomach instead of pointing to an exact spot where it hurts.
- **The Vague Test** Your child announces she "doesn't feel good" but can't get any more specific than that.
- **The Time Test** The symptoms crop up just as your child is going out the door to catch the bus.
- **The Observation Test** You don't see a runny nose, red throat, paleness, fever, rash, or any other observable sign of illness.

"If you think your child is malingering, find out why," urges Dr. Sears. Was there an incident at recess? Must she walk by a scary dog on the way to school? Does she have a math test she's not prepared for? Once you get to the root of the dramatics, you'll be surprised at what a rapid recovery your child will make.