feeling sick
When you or I are not well, what we mostly want is someone to look after us, to give us food and sympathy, peace to be able to rest, and something to keep us amused when we are feeling better. When children are sick, they need all of this and more. When they are unwell, and especially if they are in pain, children often feel frightened or worried. They need to be cared for by the people they feel close to.

Child care or school?

Child care workers or family day care workers can be loved by and trusted by children, but usually they are so busy that it is difficult for them to give the time and attention that a sick child needs.

It really is not fair to send a sick child to child care or school.

- Rest is usually not possible in a busy child care or school room.
- Also your child can pass on infections to other children and to the caregivers or teachers.
Rest

Unless they are very sick most young children will not stay in bed.

- Sick children want to be near you, or to be where the ‘action’ is.
- Being able to lie on a soft chair where they can watch you is more restful than being alone in a bedroom.
- Watching TV may not be best for a child who has a headache, but it can be relaxing for a child who is not well enough to play. It also gives you a break.
- Many sick children just want to lie in your arms for a while.
- Gentle massage of the tummy, head, legs, etc. may be very soothing to them.

Drinking and eating

- Most children who are unwell do not want to eat much.
- Not eating for a few days will not do them any harm.
- It is important for them to have extra drinks, especially if they have tummy upsets or diarrhoea or asthma.
- Try giving small drinks often; such as milk, water, diluted fruit juice, or fruit juice ice blocks. (If your child has gastro, see ‘Gastroenteritis’ to find out what drinks to offer or ask you doctor.)
Behaviour

When a young child is sick, she is likely to act in a more baby-like way for a while. Your child may:

- cry or whinge more
- want you to be near all the time
- want lots of holding and cuddles
- speak in a more baby-like way
- need a dummy again (even if she has given it up)
- wet the bed or her pants.

Some sick children, especially those under three years, refuse to be with anyone except mum or their main caregiver. They may get very distressed if left with even a close family member like dad. This is a sign of being ill and worried and does not mean the child does not like the other person.

These behaviours are all normal for a child who is sick, and they are signs that your child needs more care and attention for a while. It may be hard not to be irritated by clinging and whinging, but it will stop when your child is feeling better. If you are able to give this extra attention, usually your children will begin to ‘act their age’ quicker when they get better.
Sleep

Sick children usually need extra sleep, but their sleep can be restless and broken. If children are in pain from an earache for example, it is hard to sleep and they may be quite frightened by the pain. They can also have nightmares. Stay near by, so that your child can see you or hear you during the night. This may help your child relax and go back to sleep. You may need to consider putting a mattress for him on the floor near your bed for a while, or making a comfortable place near his bed for you to sleep. It is important that you get the best possible night’s sleep too. This need for extra attention usually only lasts until your child is well again.
Hygiene

Many of the illnesses that children have are due to infections (coughs and colds, chicken pox, tummy upsets) which they can pass on to others in the family.

- Sick children still need to be held, kissed and comforted, but be very careful about hand washing and cleanliness to help protect yourself and the rest of the family.

- Many infections are passed on when hands pick up germs and then move the germs to the mouth or nose.

- Wash your hands often and clean tables, benches, floors and toys to help lessen the spread of germs.

- Make sure that your children wash their hands often, especially before eating and after using the toilet.

- Babies are especially likely to catch infections. If possible try to stop a sick child from handling and kissing your baby. Although it can be hard to totally protect your baby, babies do have some ability to fight off infections.

Giving eye drops

Get the child to lie down with his eyes closed and put the drop into the corner of the eye nearest to the nose. Enough of the drop will flow between the eyelids for the drops to work.
Visiting

Older people and babies are more likely to become very ill with infections, so you need to ask friends or relatives before you go to visit with a sick child. Try not to have many outings or visitors to your house. Do not take your child where there are a lot of young children, such as playgroups and kindergyms.

Special Note: It is not wise to leave sick children at home alone, or in the care of an older child. If you are unable to care for them yourself try to get another adult to do so. Find out if you can take your child to work with you when she is starting to feel better.

When to see the doctor

Children often get better quickly, but if they stay unwell, or have the following symptoms they may have a serious illness, and it would be wise to see the doctor.

- a fever or pain lasting more than a couple of hours
- your child looks very pale and ill
- vomiting often
- diarrhoea goes on for more than 24 hours
- wheezing or being short of breath
- bad headache
- an unusual rash.
As a parent you have a right to see the doctor about any worries to do with your child, even if they seem small. The doctor may be able to give your child some medicines or other treatment, or may reassure you that something is ‘going around’ and that your child will recover soon.

**Reminders**

- When children are sick they need their parents or someone very close to look after them.
- Parents have the right to see a doctor if they are worried.
- Before you go to the doctor write down the things you want to ask about if you think you might forget.
- Children are often more ‘clingy’ when they are sick.
- When children feel better they soon return to their usual behaviour.
- If your children have to go to hospital they especially need your comfort.
For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline
  8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week
  Telephone (08) 9368 9368
  Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546
  www.ngala.com.au
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line
  Telephone (08) 9272 1466 (24hr service)
  Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432
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