

School students and chronic illness

Beginning primary school, or moving to secondary school, can be a challenging time for any student and family. This can be even harder when the student has a chronic (ongoing) health condition. To get the most out of their schooling, students with a chronic illness need ongoing and coordinated support from their families, schools and medical carers.

Effects of chronic illness on schooling

Students with a chronic illness may miss a lot of school. This might be because they need to go to hospital, recover at home or attend regular medical appointments. This can lead to:

- Difficulty completing work on time or taking part in exams
- Decreased academic performance
- Difficulty keeping up relationships with school friends
- Access issues like difficulty getting around the school environment
- Difficulty participating in some school activities (for example, physical education or excursions)
- Feeling less confident and less motivated. It can also affect their self-esteem and body image.

Parents and the school community need to work together

The family and the school need to work together to establish and maintain good communication and cooperation. Everyone needs to understand what is needed and expected to support the student. But the family and the school also need to be clear about what can, and cannot, be done so that everyone's expectations are achievable and realistic. The important issues are to:

- Share information
- Develop a care plan
- Keep up good communication
- Make modifications
- Seek extra support.

Share information

With family and student consent, relevant information about the student's condition should be shared with appropriate school staff. But keep these issues in mind:

- Decide how much information should be shared with school staff, classmates and the wider school community.
- Try to find a balance between the need to give adequate care and support for the student and their right to confidentiality and privacy.
- Work out who will be responsible for passing on the information, who it will be given to, how and when. This could be the student themselves, a family member, a friend, another parent chosen by the family, a staff member who works closely with the family or a support group or association.

Develop a care plan

In consultation with the student's medical carer, family and school, a school-based care or management plan should be developed. This plan should be accessible to relevant staff and reviewed every year, or whenever there is any significant change to the student's condition or treatment.

Make sure that relevant information is communicated to casual teachers and other staff who have occasional care of the student.

Keep up good communication

Make sure there is a way to maintain regular communication between the school and the family. This is so you can discuss how the student is coping at school and at home (academically, socially, physically and emotionally). For younger students, writing daily messages in a home-school communications book may help. Teachers and parents can then describe what they notice about issues like if the student has been tired, keeping up with school work, taking part in everyday activities or how they are feeling.

When a student misses a lot of school because of their health condition, both the parents and the school should try to reduce how much this affects their school work and social life. For example, it might help to:

- Send home school work.
- Establish email contact.
- Refer to the Visiting Teacher Service.
- Organise a Program Support Group.

As well as the regular communication between the parents or carers and school, the school should immediately inform the parents or carers if the school staff have needed to provide the student with any additional medical care.

Make modifications

The physical environment may need to be modified to allow full access to school facilities and activities. For example, ramps, rails, adaptive equipment or disabled toilets may be needed.

The academic environment may also need some changes. For example, modifications to the curriculum, work requirements, timetable or subject choices might be necessary. For VCE students, you should work out whether the school will need to apply for Special Provision on behalf of the student (see link below).

Seek extra support

The school may be eligible to apply for extra funding or support for the student. Staff may also need professional development opportunities or information about the specific condition or chronic illness in general.

Where to get help

- Your family doctor
- School principal
- Royal Children's Hospital
- Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute
- Chronic Illness Peer Support, Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital Tel. (03) 9345 6616
- Yooralla Independent Living Centre.

Things to remember

- A whole school approach to support a student with a chronic illness is important.
- Relevant information about the student's condition should be shared with appropriate school staff.
- Maintain regular communication between the school and family regarding how the student is coping at school and at home.

- Explore possible sources of additional support.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Royal Children's Hospital - Clinical support services

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