Introducing

A common problem often facing program administrators is how to protect the staff and children from the spread of infectious diseases. Because of their greater exposure to circulating diseases, infants and young children who spend time in group child care settings generally have a higher number of illnesses than those children cared for at home. Frequently, those who care for young children have a higher rate of illness as well. Properly training care providers in the use of universal precautions to help prevent the spread of disease will help administrators address this dilemma.

Providers—as well as administrators—need to know how diseases are transmitted and which techniques thwart their spread. This is not complicated, and if precautions are followed consistently and regularly, the spread of germs can be greatly minimized. While some may feel it is important to inform the provider when a child is ill, some diseases are contagious even when there are no symptoms. Therefore, it is important for care providers to always follow universal health precautions.

Training

Whether a program offers services in the child’s home, the provider’s home, or in a center, both new and potential providers need to be trained in health and safety techniques. This training can be provided by

- a nurse
- a nurse practitioner
- a physician
- a physician’s assistant
- an employee of the local or state health department

One major goal of the training should be to reduce the fears of providers about caring for children with serious contagious diseases.

Program directors frustrated by their board members’ concerns about liability issues
involving the transmission of diseases may want to consider training board members as well. In this way, board members will be able to better understand the security gained by consistently using universal precautions.

After the initial training, it is advisable to offer refresher courses periodically to remind providers that disease prevention is a never-ending responsibility.

**Common Types of Communicable Disease**

A communicable disease is any bacterial, viral, or parasitic infection that can be spread from one individual to another. Some of the more common diseases in young children are

- colds
- chicken pox
- diarrhea
- ring worm
- impetigo

Diseases of a more serious nature, and of greater concern to providers and administrators, are

- meningitis
- hepatitis
- HIV/AIDS

Infections can be as simple as ring worm or as complex as HIV/AIDS. Clearly, the transmission of ring worm from one person to another does not carry with it the life-threatening implications of a disease like hepatitis or AIDS. On the other hand, some common diseases can be life threatening if they are not treated. For example, bacteria and parasites that cause gastrointestinal illnesses, with symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea, can be quite serious in young children—and fatal if a child becomes dehydrated.

**How Diseases are Transmitted**

Before looking at ways to prevent the spread of disease, it is helpful to know the ways diseases are transmitted. Germs that cause diseases are commonly transmitted via the air, urine and feces, blood, saliva, skin, and drainage from the nose or open sores. They enter the body through the nose, eyes, mouth, and/or broken skin.

Impetigo and ring worm are transmitted via direct physical contact with the infected areas of skin. Diseases like colds, chicken pox, and some forms of meningitis are largely transmitted via the air and by nasal drainage and saliva.

Diarrhea, generally a symptom of some gastrointestinal virus, bacteria, or parasite, is transmitted through feces. Some forms of hepatitis can also be transmitted through feces, urine, and blood. Blood and blood products are the major carriers of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
Universal Precautions Against Communicable Diseases

Because diseases can be transmitted through many different channels, the best way to prevent their spread is with a comprehensive approach. And because the way to prevent the spread of illness is the same for any infection, providers need to understand and use universal precautions against disease.

These same precautions apply whether the provider is caring for one child or a group of children and whether care is in the child’s home, the provider’s home, or a child care setting. By consistently following these universal precautions, providers also will avoid the unpleasant situation of focusing on one particular child.

The single most important way to prevent infection is hand washing, a fact that supervisors of care providers cannot stress enough. It is recommended that child care workers wash their hands with a liquid disinfectant soap for several minutes at the beginning of their shift, and for at least thirty seconds between each child that they handle. Other universal rules of hygiene:

- Keep each child’s personal grooming articles, clothing, and bed linens separate.
- Clean and sanitize toys, utensils, and equipment frequently.
- Dispose of soiled diapers, tissues, and dressings in covered containers.
- Place changing tables and basins away from the food preparation area, and disinfect them after each use.
- Use a diaper service or disposable diapers, whenever possible.
- Use disposable gloves whenever possible for diapering and handling bodily fluids.
- Make certain open sores on both children and providers are always covered.
- Require a physician’s approval before a child with skin eruptions can attend group care.

Issues of Confidentiality

An administrator may struggle with the ethics of not disclosing to a provider that a child has HIV/AIDS, knowledge of which may be confidential to the administrator. However, if providers are adequately trained to use universal precautions of disease prevention on every occasion with every child, there is no medical reason for confidentiality to be a problem. All children should be guaranteed that they will be treated equally, just as each child deserves the right to be protected from getting or transmitting germs.

It is always possible for a child’s disease to be unknown, either because symptoms have not yet exhibited, or a particular condition has not been diagnosed, or the condition has not been disclosed to program personnel. If the staff consistently adheres to good prevention practices, fears can be dispelled that a disease will spread simply because its existence is unknown to the staff. By the same token, if universal precautions are followed consistently, it is unlikely a child with a communicable disease will be treated differently once the child’s disease is known by the provider.

Healthy Care Providers
Many care providers get sick frequently, particularly when first starting work, because they are exposed to a wider variety of infectious diseases. Also, caring for others can be stressful. Because stress lowers resistance to illness and contributes to burn-out, which in itself can contribute to illness, administrators should encourage providers to take adequate care of themselves. Providing quality care should be of paramount concern to all administrators, and a healthy care provider is the key to a healthy, happy child care experience for both the children and their families.

Program supervisors can encourage providers to stay healthier by emphasizing the importance of

- hand washing
- good nutrition
- regular exercise
- sufficient daily rest

Providers also should

- Stay current in their immunizations
- Take scheduled breaks and vacations
- Participate in extracurricular hobbies and activities that do not involve caregiving

Providers who are ill should be taking care of themselves, not someone else. In addition to spreading germs to others, a person who is ill cannot provide the usual quality of care and will take longer to get well without the opportunity to recuperate properly. Even in times of emergencies, administrators would do well to encourage staff members not to report to work if they are ill.

Because administrators are ultimately responsible for providers, children, and families, they should understand that the program is best served if the staff is adequately trained and supervised in using universal precautions to prevent the spread of disease.

**Summary**

To protect staff and children from the spread of disease, it is important to train providers in the use of universal precautions. This is especially true because some diseases are contagious even before symptoms appear, and because the disease status of a child may not be known.

Communicable diseases are any bacterial, viral, or parasitic infections that can spread from one individual to another. The same precautions necessary to prevent the spread of less serious diseases are used to prevent the spread of more serious ones, and they should be used regularly and consistently for every child, in every setting.

The single most important way to prevent the spread of germs is by **hand washing**. Properly cleaning toys, utensils, personal care items, and bed linens, as well as properly disposing of articles soiled by bodily fluids, are other key precautions. Although care providers are exposed to a variety of germs and frequently experience stress on the job, it is important for them to take care of themselves so they will remain healthy. In this way they can better serve children and families.
Protecting Staff and Children from the Spread of Disease

Resources


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