

When is a Child Too Sick for School?

At one point or another, every parent of a grade-schooler has to face the tough choice of whether or not to send a sick child to school. It can be tough to know, especially with younger school-age children, whether or not you really are dealing with a sick child. Is he angling for time with mom and the requisite perks of being sick such as extra cuddles and maybe even a DVD? Is he worried about something at school? Or is he coming down with an infection?

It's a major issue, especially for working moms and dads. Here's a quick guide to when you should keep your sick child at home and when you can take a chance that he'll feel better once he gets into his school day.

Keep a Sick Child at Home if You See the Following:

- **Fever.** This is one symptom that automatically rules out school, no questions. (Anywhere from 100 degrees or higher is the usual guideline used by most schools.) **Your sick child should be fever-free without medication for at least 24 hours before you send him back to school.**
- **Diarrhea.** This could be a sign of a viral infection, so it's best to keep your child at home. It's also important to keep rehydrating him with an oral rehydrating solution when he has diarrhea, and the best way to do that is by keeping him at home.
- **Vomiting.** Aside from the fact that your child won't be comfortable, he could vomit again (in our house, one bout of vomiting is usually followed by another). Keep him home until he has gone 24 hours without throwing up -- though some parents and doctors say it's fine to send a child to school if he hasn't vomited since the night before.
- **Cough.** This depends on how severe the cough is. Coughs can spread infection to other students. A serious cough can also keep a child from getting a good night's rest, which means he'll be too tired for school in the morning. As a general rule, if your child has a serious cough, particularly if it's accompanied by breathing troubles, call your doctor and keep him home. But if it's just a mild cough and he has no other symptoms, he can probably go to school.
- **Rashes.** Skin rashes could be a sign of a contagious infection, such as impetigo. You should have a rash evaluated by a doctor before sending your child to school.
- **Pinkeye (conjunctivitis).** This infection can quickly and easily spread from one child to another, as many parents of grade-school age children already know all too well. Keep your child home until the doctor says he is no longer contagious.

Send Your Child to School if You See the Following:

- **Stomachache.** This one can be tough to call. If he doesn't have diarrhea and isn't constipated, tummy trouble could be caused by any number of things from anxiety to food poisoning. If the stomach pains seem minor and he has no other symptoms, send him to school. Later, you can talk to him about any emotional issues that may be on his mind.
- **Ear infection.** As with coughs, you should evaluate all his symptoms before making the call. If he has mild ear pain, he'll likely be fine; but if he's clearly uncomfortable, he will have trouble concentrating in class anyway and should be kept at home. And if there are any other accompanying symptoms such as a fever, it's a definite sick day.
- **Runny nose.** Let's be realistic: If you kept your child home every time he had the sniffles, he'd miss a lot of school. Use your judgment. If he has a runny nose but seems otherwise fine, then it's probably okay for him to go to school.

The bottom line: Trust your instincts. If your child seems lethargic and just not himself (if he's not interested in playing, that is often a big clue), keep him home and monitor him for any signs of illness.