

Guidance

Managing sickness in school children

NHS
*Brighton and Hove
Clinical Commissioning Group*


**Brighton & Hove
City Council**

Guidance

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September 2017

Developed in collaboration with Brighton & Hove City Council Public Health Team, NHS Brighton & Hove Clinical Commissioning Group, Brighton & Hove Local Medical Committee, Brighton & Hove Families, Children and Learning Team, and the Head Teacher from Middle Street Primary School.

Aim of this guidance

This document has been produced to bring health, education and families together and is based on feedback / consultation from GPs and Teachers in line with national best practice. The aim is to work together so children grow up healthy, get the best from their education and enter adulthood with the best options available which is a key priority for all.

NHS Brighton & Hove CCG and Brighton & Hove City Council have jointly developed this guidance to manage the information required when a child is absent from school. The aim of this guidance is to make it clear when it is appropriate to seek medical evidence of absence and when it is not. Also, to improve the knowledge and clarity of communications and responsibilities of GPs, schools and parents/ carers.

Guidance for schools

When to request medical proof of absence

At some time or another, most GP practices have received requests to provide medical certifications or letters to present to the school of a young patient, to verify their absence from school or to excuse them from certain activities.

In general an explanation from the parents / carers of an absence from school is sufficient for the purposes of the school – the medicalisation of trivial problems and minor ailments is neither appropriate nor helpful to the wellbeing of the child.

Statutory Guidance (School Attendance, published November 2016):

‘Schools should advise parents to notify them on the first day the child is unable to attend due to illness. Schools should authorise absences due to illness unless they have genuine cause for concern about the veracity of an illness. If the authenticity of illness is in doubt, schools can request parents to provide medical evidence to support illness. Schools can record the absence as unauthorised if not satisfied of the authenticity of the illness but should advise parents of their intention. Schools are advised not to request medical evidence unnecessarily. Medical evidence can take the form of prescriptions, appointment cards, etc. rather than doctors’ notes.’¹

Schools and Attendance Staff should not seek routine confirmation of a medical reason for absence. Parents can supply this information and in most circumstances the GP will have no more information than that provided by the parents/carers. In cases where the illness is severe enough to have required a review by a clinician then parents may be asked to show an appointment card / text or hospital appointment letter in support of this in some cases.

If school or attendance staff require further information about a child’s physical or mental health to enable them to provide relevant support then the Head teacher or Safeguarding lead would, with the parents’/ carers’ consent, directly contact the GP Practice safeguarding lead.

It is for schools to determine on a case by case basis whether to authorise absence due to sickness based upon the information supplied by parents or carers. Schools will consider the circumstances of each case and decide whether they feel it necessary to ask for further supporting evidence. We would not expect schools to request medical evidence unless there is a clear case for doing so, and any such request will usually be made directly to the Practice by a member of the School senior management team with the consent of the child’s parents /carers. In most cases, as stated in the guidance above, medical evidence can take the form of prescriptions, appointment cards, etc. rather than doctors’ notes.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/564599/school_attendance.pdf

School Attendance Staff

The role of school attendance staff is to work with parents and children of statutory school age to improve regular school attendance. They are employed by the school and part of their role is to ensure paperwork is sufficient in order that legal action can be taken against parents or carers as necessary for failing to send children to school.

There is no obligation on GP Practices to provide information to schools and no information should be shared without the consent of the parents and /or child if they are competent to give consent, unless there is an immediate safeguarding concern.

GP's obligations regarding medical certification

GP Practices are not contractually obliged to produce certificates or letters requested, and a fee can be charged if they should agree to do so. There is no national guidance on how much this fee should be, and fees can vary in price from Practice to Practice. It is therefore essential that we establish when sick notes or certificates are appropriate and when they are not.

- The provision of medical certificates for school children is not part of a GP's responsibility.
- Refusing to provide this certification is in accord with the current aims to reduce GP paperwork and preserve valuable GP time for clinical care.
- GPs cannot issue 'sick notes' or fit notes just to meet social security purposes.
- GPs can refuse to issue private letters, be that certifying fact or giving an opinion, but if they choose to comply with the request, they may charge a reasonable fee.

If a Practice is contacted by a member of the School senior management team or School Attendance staff regarding concerns about a child's absence with the parent/ carers written consent, then it would be good practice to share appropriate relevant information without charge. The School will only contact the GP Practice in exceptional circumstances because they have significant concerns regarding a child's attendance and require information to provide support regarding a physical or mental health condition.

GPs should always consider the possibility that a safeguarding issue exists and take appropriate action when necessary. Poor school attendance in itself can be viewed as a safeguarding issue by the Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).

Exams

- **Special consideration for Exams**

Schools can manage the needs of a child in advance of an exam (such as to make arrangements for those with additional needs due to visual impairments, physical limitations, or learning differences), there is no need for a medical note. This was confirmed in a letter from Ofqual to the General Practitioners Committee².

- **Missing Exams**

Parents can supply information where a child has missed an exam due to illness, GPs often will not have seen the child and often will have no more information than that provided by parents/carers.

The obligations of schools in managing illnesses of pupils

On 1 September 2014, a new duty came into force for governing bodies to make arrangements to support pupils at school with medical conditions. The Department for Education produced guidance for schools entitled, 'Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions, (December 2015)³ which states that governing bodies:

- Must ensure that arrangements are in place in schools to support pupils at school with medical conditions.
- Should ensure that all schools develop a policy for supporting pupils with medical conditions that is reviewed regularly and is readily accessible to parents and school staff.
- Should ensure that the school's policy covers the role of individual healthcare plans, and who is responsible for their development, in supporting pupils at school with medical conditions.
- Should ensure that the school's policy sets out clearly how staff will be supported in carrying out their role to support pupils with medical conditions, and how this will be reviewed.
- Must ensure that no child under 16 should be given prescription or non-prescription medicines without their parent's written consent except in exceptional circumstances.
- The Department for Education has also produced various templates to help schools create individual healthcare plans and help them obtain written parental agreement to administer medicines to their child.

² <http://www.sslmc.co.uk/PDFs/Sickness%20Certification%20and%20Schools%20-%20Ofqual%20letter.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions--3>

Administration of non-prescription (over the counter) medication in nurseries and schools – British Medical Association advice⁴

The revised 'The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework' which governs the standards of institutions looking after and educating children, includes a paragraph under specific legal requirements - medicines that states:

'Medicines should only be taken to a setting when this is essential and settings should only accept medicines that have been prescribed by a doctor, dentist, nurse or pharmacist.' However, the GPC and Department of Children, Schools and Families subsequently confirmed in 2015 that an FP10 is not required, and non-prescription medication (over-the-counter medication) can be administered where there is parents' written consent. Nurseries and Schools should follow this latest guidance.

'Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions' (December 2015)⁵ provides guidance on when schools can prescribe medication to children.

Nurseries

It is common for parents to make a request for Nurseries to administer over the counter medications for their very young children. In response most Nurseries will say that they need to have 'child specific' bottles with prescription labels on them. While there may be practical reasons to have 'child specific' bottles of medication, there is no requirement for labels to be provided by a pharmacy on an over-the-counter medication. A parent may write the name of their child and the dosage required on a label.

Ofsted has produced a very useful factsheet⁶; see link below, that confirms that written permission from parents to administer over the counter medications is sufficient.

'The Statutory Framework allows you to give over-the-counter medication such as pain and fever relief or teething gel. However, you must get written permission beforehand from parents. And, you must follow the same recording procedures as those for prescribed medication.'

⁴ <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice/employment/gp---practices/quality---9irst/manage---inappropriate---workload/prescribing---non---prescription---medication>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions--3>

⁶ <http://www.yor-ok.org.uk/downloads/Childcare%20Strategy/OSC/Giving%20medication%20in%20childcare.pdf>

Guidance for Schools and GPs re Infectious diseases

Public Health England has published 'Guidance on Infection Control in Schools and other Childcare Settings'⁷ that is designed to prevent the spread of infections such as rashes and skin infections, diarrhoea and vomiting, and respiratory infections. This is a useful reference document in the event that practices receive enquiries from schools that suddenly find themselves facing such a situation. Guidelines for some common complaints include:

- Chickenpox – stay home until all vesicles have crusted over.
- Impetigo – stay home until all lesions have crusted and healed, or 48 hours after commencing antibiotic treatment.
- Scabies – child can return after first treatment.
- Diarrhoea and/or vomiting – 48 hours from last episode.
- Flu – until recovered.
- Head lice – none.
- Conjunctivitis – none.

Further examples are available in the guidance. A link is available in the footnotes.

Conclusion

This guidance reflects the current procedures and rules that applied at the time of writing (September 2017). It is designed to cover some typical situations that may arise and is inevitably generic in nature to some degree. External references may have been updated further to publication of this guidance.

The guidance is endorsed by NHS Brighton & Hove CCG, Brighton & Hove City Council along with Brighton & Hove Headteachers Forum.

To be reviewed in September 2020.

⁷ http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Guidance_on_infection_control_in%20schools_poster.pdf