Steps for Child Care Facilities To Prevent Illness

To prevent illness, programs must pay attention to risks and reduce them. Research shows that four steps make a difference:

1. **Write and use policies** that define how the program avoids known problems.
2. **Establish routine checks** for conditions and practices that could cause harm.
3. **Use records of illness** to see what needs attention.
4. **Make and implement Action Plans** that reduce the risks and control illness. As appropriate, modify written policies and routine checks so the program does better in the future.

Many facilities have joined Pennsylvania’s Keystone STARS. Keystone STARS is a system of continuous quality improvement for early education and child care programs. Standards for STARS include requirements to control illness and injury in the section on Continuous Quality Improvement.

This is the first of two issues of *Health Link Online* about systematic approaches to control illness and injury. This article recommends approaches that will help all facilities reduce the risk of illness. These recommendations are not required steps for Keystone STARS, but will help programs meet STARS standards. The March issue of *Health Link Online* will have an article about reducing injury. If you have any questions or need advice about how to implement these four steps, contact ECELS by phone or e-mail. (See contact information below.)

### 1. Write and Use Policies

Every program needs written health policies. These polices are tools for staff and parent orientation, and a reference for operation of the program. Sitting down to write policies from scratch is hard. You can use a set of model policies to get started. Many aspects of written health and safety policies are similar from one facility to another. However, you must adapt model policies to make them appropriate for your site.

To help early educators write health and safety policies, ECELS collected the written policies of many successful programs. Then, national health and safety experts and national education experts worked together to publish *Model Child Care Health Policies (MCCHP)*. This document is a set of “starter” policies with blanks for staff to fill in to adapt the policies for a particular site. You’ll find many sample forms in the appendix of MCCHP that you can use to implement the policies. To buy a hard copy of this guide, order it from the National Association for the Education of Young Children at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org). For a free copy of *Model Child Care Health Policies*, download the file from the website address in the box below.

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Consult a Child Care Health Consultant to be sure your site's health policies are up-to-date with what experts recommend. If your program does not already have a local health professional who routinely visits to offer health and safety advice, ECELS can help you find one. A Child Care Health Consultant can help develop a plan of action to improve practices. Minimizing the risk of the spread of illness among the children keeps staff healthier too!

2. Establish Routine Checks

In Model Child Care Health Policies, Appendix Q, you will find a Health and Safety Checklist. The Health and Safety Checklist is a tool to raise awareness and find risky practices that people might otherwise overlook. Pages 1-5 of the checklist are especially relevant for illness prevention. Monthly checks are a good idea. You will find more hazards if different people do different parts of the checklist and if you change who does the checks from one month to another.

Also look in Model Child Care Health Policies, Appendix G for Instructions for the Daily Health Check, and Appendix R for Cleaning Guidelines.

3. Use Records of Illness to See What Needs Attention

Illness/Symptom Record: On a daily basis, facilities need to document enrollment, attendance and symptoms for the children in care. Some programs use a sign-in sheet at the entrance to the facility that parents complete; others have a classroom log. A good tool for tracking illness is in Model Child Care Health Policies, Appendix H: Enrollment/ Attendance/ Symptom Record.

Tracking Procedure: Every day, someone should look at the records of symptoms to detect patterns of illness promptly — in each group of children and in the facility overall. Stepping up sanitation and hygiene work best if done at the first sign of an outbreak. In addition, someone on the staff should review the daily illness/symptom records about once a month, noting differences in patterns between groups of children in the facility. Such differences might indicate that a particular group needs to pay more attention to sanitation and hygiene measures to prevent disease.

Corrective Action: When children in a group seem to have similar symptoms that suggest a contagious disease is spreading, consult a Child Care Health Consultant. The Child Care Health Consultant can help develop a plan of action to minimize the spread of illness among children, staff and families.

4. Make and Implement an Action Plan

Figure out what you want to change, the resources you will need, who will be responsible for needed changes, how changes will be implemented, and a time frame to get the job done. Assign the tasks, including checkpoints when a responsible person will monitor progress on the plan.

These approaches and tools will benefit you every day. Children and staff will be healthier. You will have fewer absences, and lessen the staff and family burden of caring for ill children.

MyPyramid

In this issue of Health Link Online, Elise Gurgevich, Ph.D., MPH, Penn State Nutrition Links State Coordinator, Penn State Cooperative Extension begins a series of articles about the new nutrition guidelines that will help children, staff and families get in shape and stay healthy.

A year ago the USDA released a new food guidance system. The previous Food Guide Pyramid (FGP) changed to the new "MyPyramid: Steps to A Healthier You." The shape of the pyramid stayed the same, but MyPyramid has some very helpful new twists. Look at the revised pyramid yourself. Go to the website www.MyPyramid.gov.