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Few options for parents when kids get sick

Most call on relatives or take time off from work

By JOHN PRZYBYS
REVIEW-JOURNAL

Christine Johnson of Henderson has two children, a daughter in seventh grade and a son who just started kindergarten. She knows that one day, probably between now and next June, she'll face a dilemma all working parents face whenever parental obligation, professional responsibility and a stray microbe cross paths:

What to do when one of the kids takes ill and has to stay home from school.

Johnson, president and owner of PIE Design & Marketing, considers herself lucky. Her mother so far has been able to travel across the valley to help out with sick child sitting chores.

"So she's sort of my backup" Johnson says. "But I always think of single moms who don't have anybody."

Take a sick day of your own to stay home with an ailing child? Try to find a sitter at the last minute? Impose upon a family member? Or, even, cross your fingers, send a child to school or day care anyway and just hope for the best?

Like many parenting issues, dealing with a sick child even has a moral dimension: Send a child with the flu to school, and a parent risks exposing other students, teachers or staff, too.

Michele Tell Woodrow, chief executive officer of Preferred Public Relations & Marketing and mother of a 6- and a 2-year-old, says a parent's first responsibility is "keeping your (sick) child out of that classroom."

Tell Woodrow so far has been able to call upon her mom or hire child care when one of her own kids takes ill. As owner of her company, it's easier for her to rearrange her day as necessary, she adds.

But, Tell Woodrow says, "so many, unfortunately, have no options. They're living here without close family or friends."

Lois Holman of Henderson, an employee of the Clark County School District, says she's lucky to have employers who understand if she has to leave the office or take the day off to care for her 8-year-old son.

"His grandparents live in town, so they're more than willing to stay at home with him," she adds.

Diana Taylor, director of health services for the Clark County School District, says most parents know they should keep their kids home if they're sick, and "send their kids to school in good faith" that a child's morning sniffles or stomachache really are nothing serious.

But if, as the school day progresses, "he's sitting in class not feeling well," Taylor says, shows a temperature of 100 or higher, is vomiting or has diarrhea, a parent or designated adult will be called to pick him up.

Ideally, the parent will arrive quickly, "but I know that varies," Taylor says. "We have parents who work out at Indian Springs, so we have to wait."

If a parent can't be contacted -- because, say, the school has no valid phone number or can't reach a designated backup -- an attendance officer may be sent to the home, Taylor says. And, because school officials can't send a sick child home alone, a child whose parents can't be contacted may be transported to the hospital after the school day ends.

One option a parent probably won't have is dropping a sick child off at a day care center.

"Unfortunately, most child care facilities, including ours, are not licensed to provide care for sick children," says D'Ann Blatt, director of Lit'l Scholar Academy, 8951 Hillpointe Road.

"If we know a child is contagious or has any symptoms of illness, then he can't come to school. But, very often, parents won't tell us. They give (the child) some medicine in the morning and hope to make it through the day."

According to Blatt, Lit'l Scholar's guidelines are that a child cannot attend if he or she has excess discharge from the eyes or nose, a temperature higher than 101 or any type of diarrhea or vomiting. Then, Blatt says, the child won't be able to return until at least 24 hours after the symptoms have disappeared.

Most parents understand, Blatt says, although a few have become "very upset and irate." But, she adds, the policy is intended to protect other children and staff from contagion, ensure that the child receives the one-on-one medical care he or she needs, and make sure the child is comfortable as he or she recuperates.

Texas-based Children's Choice Learning Center operates five child care facilities in Southern Nevada for employees of Station Casinos and MGM Grand. The MGM Grand location also offers a service called Sniffles and Snuggles, in which a separate suite of rooms -- staffed by medical professionals and equipped with a separate ventilation system -- is reserved for "mildly ill" children of MGM employees.

According to Nate McClintock, president and CEO of Children's Choice, the company manages day care centers for resorts, hospitals, universities and other businesses in 16 states.

Businesses find that having such facilities on-site reduces absenteeism among employees who otherwise would have to take off of work to care for sick children, McClintock says.

However, McClintock notes, Sniffles and Snuggles is offered only at the MGM Grand location and is open only to that company's employees.

The bottom line: Every parent should have a backup plan for those inevitable days when a child takes ill, whether that means asking a family member, friend or neighbor to pick up the slack, finding a sitter who will agree to stay with a sick child on short notice, or reserving a few sick days to use on behalf of a sick child.

Taylor urges parents to make sure a child's school has current, working phone numbers -- including cell phone numbers -- for parents and other designated contacts.

Also make sure the school has information for designated backup contacts, with working phone numbers, in case the parent or primary backup isn't available.

Keep those numbers, and the list of designated backups, up to date. And, Holman suggests, "make

sure your child knows your cell phone number."

Then, with a Plan B -- and maybe even a Plan C and a Plan D -- in place, all that's left is to wait for the day it'll inevitably be needed.

"It's not anyone's fault that a child gets sick," Blatt says. "That's part of life. That's part of growing up."

What's important, Blatt says, is "how we react to the situation."

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