Asthma Doesn't Stop at the School Door

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Children spend a substantial part of their day at school, often about nine hours. For children living with asthma, managing symptoms triggered by respiratory illnesses, environmental factors, or physical activity can sometimes affect their learning and participation in school.

When children have breathing difficulties, many parents, understandably, become concerned. Parents may be worried about sending their child to school if they are having a flare of asthma symptoms or wondering if their child's needs can be adequately met in school.

To help children participate safely and effectively in school life, careful planning and communication between parents/guardians, doctors, school nurses, and school staff is essential.

This article will explore how parents and school personnel can collaborate to understand the needs of children living with asthma and provide the appropriate care.

Understanding Asthma at School

Asthma is a chronic condition that affects the airways in the lungs making it harder to move air in and out. When asthma symptoms occur, the airway muscles tighten, the airway lining becomes inflamed and swollen, and there is an increase in mucus production contributing to narrowed airways. This creates a smaller passageway for air to get through.

While not everyone has the same triggers, symptoms can be triggered by:

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- allergens (pollen, dust mites, mold, cockroaches, rodent droppings)
- respiratory illness
- environmental factors (extreme cold, heat, wind)
- irritants (cleaning products, perfume, paint, smoke, air pollution)

Some of these triggers may exist in school environments, while some may exist at home. It may not be possible to identify every trigger or prevent every exposure, but learning to recognize symptoms and knowing what to do is critical to good asthma management.

The Asthma Action Plan

The Asthma Action Plan is a written set of individualized instructions that provides guidance for routine management, worsening symptoms, and emergencies. Many plans use three zones similar to a traffic light–green=go, yellow=slow down, red=stop.

The Asthma Action Plan typically contains information on recognizing worsening symptoms and when to seek urgent medical care, and what specific medication(s) to take, including how much, how often, and how it should be taken.

The Asthma Action Plan is an important guide for parents, caregivers, and school personnel, as well as school-aged children who are able to recognise their symptoms and tell an adult. It may help to reduce some of the uncertainty, guide asthma-related decisions, and help the adults involved understand what actions to take when the child's symptoms change.

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Preparing for the School Day

When parents and caregivers bring their children with asthma to school, it is important to inform school nurses of the child's diagnosis. School nurses can inform parents what, if any, forms are necessary to be completed by doctors.

Doctors can prescribe medications for the individualized needs of a child, determine whether a particular child may need asthma medications before physical activity, and what happens after an asthma flare. A child's developmental abilities may be assessed as to whether they are able to self-administer their medication.

School nurses use this information to make informed decisions on medication administration in school and to convey to school staff the needs of the child. Parents and caregivers should update the school personnel whenever there is a change in the child's needs or treatment. All medication administration depends on the specific child's prescription, parental consent, the child's developmental abilities, school/district policies, and state or local laws.

Field trips and other activities may require advance coordination to ensure that medication is accessible and that responsible adults know what to do if symptoms occur.

Supporting Children During School Activities

School nurses or parents may share relevant health information with the appropriate school personnel, consistent with applicable privacy rules and school policies, to support the

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needs of the child. The goal of proper asthma management in schools is to enable children to be present and participate in school activities and learning.

Children whose asthma is well controlled should generally be able to participate in physical activity. In fact, the American Lung Association states that there are many benefits of physical activity for people with asthma. With the proper management and control, children should be able to actively participate, though it doesn't guarantee that symptoms will not occur during activity. School nurses can educate school staff on recognizing asthma symptoms, and if possible, review the child's Asthma Action Plan. Staff should be aware if there are specific times when a child may need their medication, and how to access it. Medication may be kept in the medical room, in the school bag, or at an accessible location determined by school personnel.

Whenever school nurses or personnel notice any worsening of a child's symptoms, prompt action is warranted. The Asthma Action Plan should be followed for what to do for worsening symptoms and emergency services must be activated when necessary.

When Symptoms Worsen

Recognizing worsening symptoms and acting promptly are imperative to the safety of children with asthma. The Asthma Action Plan is individualized and may indicate symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, or chest tightness when children should stop and take their medication. Always follow the child's specific plan.

Severe worsening of symptoms, such as having blue lips or fingernails, or difficulty talking due to shortness of breath, warrants immediate emergency assistance. These symptoms

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can indicate severe breathing impairment and dangerously low oxygen levels. Emergency assistance should not be delayed while staff attempt to contact parents.

Planning Makes a Difference

Asthma management at school works best when parents, healthcare professionals, and school personnel communicate and understand their roles. Educating parents and staff on what asthma is and how to effectively manage symptoms can enable children to have a healthy school life and participate in learning and activities.

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