

# Taking Care of Themselves: Children can do more than we think

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Just when can children take charge of their own health? New research shows that, even at age 5, children are quite clued up on ways to keep well.

In our study we talked to 53 Wellington children about what it means to stay healthy and what they know about certain illnesses. To find out how healthy these 5- and 9-year-olds thought they were, we asked them to colour an oval shape using two felt-tip pens, an orange one 'to show how much of you is well', and a blue one 'to show how much of you is sick.' Of course some children turned the oval into a person and coloured bits of blue for 'sore throat' and 'hurt knee'! The majority of the younger children coloured the oval all orange, showing they were 100% well. These 5-year-olds 'centred' on total health – that is, they didn't seem to realise that you can feel a little bit sick even if you are generally healthy. Older children's drawings were more complicated, often with bits of blue to show their health worries. Younger children too, were more likely to think they would stay well their whole lives.

## *Children's Ideas for Staying Healthy*

Almost all the children could think of ways that they could stay healthy. Some examples from the 5-year-olds were:

running,  
skipping,  
jogging,  
eating good food,  
eating toast and potatoes.

The 9-year-olds were also aware of the need for good food and exercise, but they often gave more details:

Eat properly – fruit, meat, vegetables.  
Wash – keep yourself clean. Exercise.

As you might expect, the 9-year-old children had much more knowledge of health, and also of illness, than the 5-year-olds. We asked each child a set of questions about four different clinical conditions:

a cold,  
a heart attack,  
a broken arm,  
chickenpox.

Older children showed greater knowledge of the four illnesses, although they were more likely to know about external signs of illness (like 'falling over' when someone has a heart attack), rather than knowing about internal, physiological causes. Children knew much more about the conditions they had had more experience with, like a cold or a broken arm.

Even the youngest children could suggest ways of preventing colds. The 5-year-olds talked to us before they had been taught anything from the new health syllabus, but they already had some ideas about how to stay healthy, such as by keeping warm.

## *Implications for Teachers*

In the past, children sometimes used to be 'taught' about colds by having checks on whether they brought handkerchiefs to school. However, the children we interviewed were ready for a much more active role in keeping themselves healthy. When they knew we were not looking for 'right' or 'wrong' answers, they were willing to talk about their own ideas and strategies.

So, rather than being told:

bring a handkerchief,  
don't eat too many lollies,  
don't smoke,

children need help to work it out themselves. We think the research shows that young children already have experiences to draw on regarding their health. They can be encouraged to think about health issues and, ultimately, to take more responsibility for their own health.

## *Note*

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A full report of the research described here is available from Dr Val Podmore, NZCER, Box 3237, Wellington, New Zealand.

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