



American Counseling Association

School Counselor Connection

Student Chronic Illness: Suggestions for Professional School Counselors

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010), a chronic illness has a duration of at least a year, as well as requires continual medical care and/or limits daily living activities. While some chronic illnesses are visible because of navigational tools like wheelchairs and canes, many are invisible, such as pain disorders. Furthermore, students may experience multiple chronic conditions. Also, chronic disease disproportionately impacts racial/ethnic minorities and those who are economically disadvantaged (Price, Khubchandani, McKinney, & Braun, 2013).

Here are some suggestions:

- Work collaboratively with school administrators, teachers, parents, medical providers.
- Recognize that parents may not know how to advocate and may be overwhelmed with financial pressures and caregiving responsibilities.
- Explore 504 Plan or Individualized Educational Program.
 - What will student do if they need assistance during school day?
 - How can student get help without feeling self-conscious (a special hall pass)?
 - Can workload be simplified to key assignments?
 - What physical accommodations need to take place?
 - Pillows/comfort
 - Locker placements
 - Distance and time between classes
- Develop a re-entry plan if student has extended medical leave of absence.
 - What will student say to other students?
 - What do teachers need to know?
- Explore transitional options.
 - Are there homebound teachers?
 - How can technology help students continue in their studies?
 - Online classes.
 - A robot at school that allows the student to “be in class” virtually, while participating using their laptop from home or hospital.
- Understand how chronic illness may impact academic performance. In addition to physical issues, are there fatigue, brain fog, concentration difficulties that may be a result of the illness or side effect of the medication?
- Screen for emotional co-occurring mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression.
- Be prepared for relapse or flare-ups. There will be good days and bad days, which are often beyond the ability of the child to predict or control.
- Remember to include activities/classwork that the student finds engaging, including electives.
- Encourage students to participate in school community and extracurriculars when possible.
- Identify strategies to adjust to the chronic illness in the school setting.
 - What coping skills can be implemented?
 - Are additional referrals needed?
 - Where is the student in the grief process, which often accompanies chronic illness?
- Encourage additional exploration of post-secondary education and career options.
- Stay positive!

— Simone Lambert, Ph.D., LPC, NCC
President, American Counseling Association