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School attendance and chronic illness

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School absence is an objective, valuable indicator of child wellness. Chronic illness impairs school attendance, and both impair cognitive functioning, social relationships and behaviour. School absence leads to academic under-performance and a higher drop-out rate. Many health, social, and economic factors affect attendance rates. The purpose of this study was to establish the extent of school absence in children with a chronic illness and to ascertain associated factors that may influence school absence. Questionnaires were distributed to parents of children visiting a regional university hospital. A convenience sample of 28 children with a chronic illness (CI) and a control sample of 28 children without medical conditions was obtained. Mean school absence was higher in the CI group (mean 10.4days, median 9days, range 0-56days) than in the control group (mean 7.7days, median 5days, range 0-28days), as was absence due to medical appointments (1.85days vs. 1.3days mean). However, absence due to acute illnesses was higher in the control group (5.85days) than in the illness group (1.75days mean). Children with asthma were absent for mean 11.4 days, children with headaches 11days, and children with diabetes 5.3 days. Children who were absent for more than 20 days of school were more likely to have a chronic illness, to have been bullied in the preceding year, to have learning support in school, and to have a psychiatric disorder than children who missed less than five days of school. School absence is more prevalent in children with chronic illnesses. The need for learning support in school, academic non-proficiency, psychiatric co-morbidity, and bullying were associated with an increase in school absence. Children with asthma were absent for longer than children with other chronic conditions. Any intervention designed to reduce school absence should focus on children in these high-risk groups, and should involve healthcare professionals, families, and schools working together.

Biography

Doireann Eves is a Pediatric Senior House Officer at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, Ireland. She has an interest in psychosomatic aspect of general pediatric medicine. She hopes to develop a mindfulness based intervention group for children with chronic illnesses with the aim of teaching coping skills, improving school attendance and maximizing social functioning.

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