

HOW TO KNOW YOUR SCHOOL-GOING CHILD IS SICK

By Umar Nsubuga

When four-year-old Catherine Namiro's third-born began crying every morning before school, she thought it was just another child's trick to avoid class.

"I used to think she didn't want to wake up, so I would scold her or sometimes beat her. One day I even gave her Panadol, thinking it was a minor issue, but the crying didn't stop. When I finally took her to a nearby clinic, the doctor told me she had a serious infection and needed immediate admission," she says.

Namiro still remembers the doctor's words when her daughter was admitted: "If you had delayed another day, the infection could have become life-threatening."

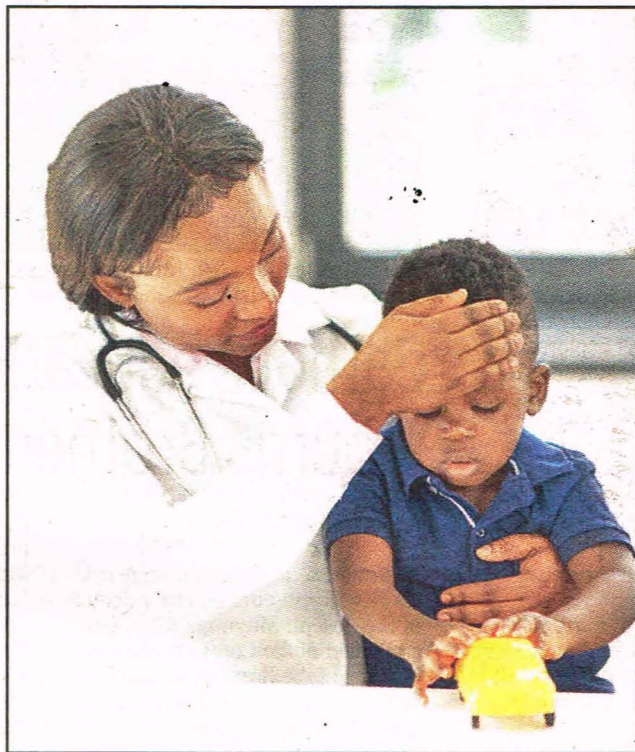
Namiro says that moment changed her life as a parent. "Seeing the drip on her tiny hand broke my heart. I realised I had ignored the signs: body weakness, loss of appetite, and the constant crying."

That wake-up call made her change her parenting approach.

"Now, I always check her temperature, ask her questions, and never dismiss her feelings."

Namiro's story is not unique. Many parents across Uganda have mistaken signs of sickness for misbehaviour, laziness, or simply a bad mood. Experts say in homes and schools, countless children suffer quietly because adults fail to notice the early symptoms of illness.

For other children, especially



A doctor examining a child at a clinic. In many Ugandan homes, subtle signs of sickness in children go unnoticed

those with chronic conditions such as sickle cell, diabetes or epilepsy, it is important to make teachers aware so that they can administer first aid in case of an attack.

UNDERSTANDING HIDDEN SIGNS

"Often, children fear injections or medicine and pretend to be fine, but if a parent knows their child's usual behaviour, how they play, talk, eat and sleep, any sudden change should raise concern," Nuruh Nalwanga, a senior nursing officer at Kawempe Hospital,

says.

Nalwanga explains that fever is one of the body's first signals of sickness.

"A rise in temperature means the body is fighting something, unfortunately, many parents wait until it is too late, when admission is the only option", she says.

Medical experts note that a child's normal body temperature is around 37°C. Anything above this could indicate fever and requires close monitoring.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

Dr Hassan Mayanja, a physician at Mercy Hospital in Mpererwe, Kampala, urges parents to strike a balance between what their children say and what they observe.

"If your child says they have stomach pain but are happily eating sausages and pancakes, you may relax, but if they refuse to eat or drink, that's a red flag," he says.

Dr Mayanja adds that vomiting after meals, persistent diarrhoea, pale skin, restlessness or shivering are often signs of underlying illness.

"A healthy child is playful, hungry and active. Any deviation, especially tiredness or withdrawal, should be taken seriously."

Dr Farida Akujju, a paediatrician in Gulu, says parents should also watch out for more abstract symptoms such as headaches, sore throats, or breathing difficulties.

"Children rarely describe pain accurately, when they say 'neck pain,' it could actually mean a sore throat or swollen glands," she explains.

EVERYDAY CLUES PARENTS MISS

In many homes, subtle signs go unnoticed.

Halima Namutebi, another paediatrician based in Kampala, points to one common symptom parents often ignore — frequent toilet visits.

"When a child keeps rushing to the toilet, it may signal a urinary tract infection, the bladder becomes sensitive and triggers frequent urination,

even when it isn't full," she explains.

Namutebi adds that diarrhoea or a running stomach are also clear signs that something is wrong, especially if accompanied by fever or dehydration.

"Cough, flu, vomiting and difficulty in breathing should never be dismissed as normal childhood issues, parents should see a doctor immediately," Namutebi cautions.

WITHOUT WORDS

Dr Akujju explains that while

adults can explain what they feel, children demonstrate illness through their actions.

"A playful child who suddenly prefers to sit quietly in a corner is telling you something, you don't always need words, just observation," she says.

Dr Akujju encourages parents and teachers to be more attentive.

"In schools, teachers can notice when a child is unusually sleepy, weak or uninterested in class. That's often the first sign that something is wrong."

WHAT TO DO WHEN A CHILD IS SICK

Experts recommend that every parent has a basic understanding of first aid and how to act before reaching a hospital.

"If a child has a fever, help them cool down with a lukewarm cloth, not cold water, because that can trigger convulsions, remove heavy clothing and keep the child in a comfortable position," Halima Namutebi, a paediatrician based in Kampala, advises.

For children with vomiting or diarrhoea, she emphasises the importance of hydration. "Give plenty of fluids, including oral rehydration solution. Dehydration is what kills most children during diarrhoea."

Dr Mayanja adds that in case of convulsions, caregivers should not panic.

"Place the child on their side, remove objects nearby, and never try to force anything into their mouth, then seek immediate medical help," he says.

If illness occurs at school, the teacher should notify the school nurse and contact the parent immediately. "Every second counts when a child is sick," Dr Mayanja stresses.

All experts agree that observation is the first and most powerful tool any parent can have. From changes in appetite to mood swings and energy levels, every detail matters.

"It's not about becoming paranoid, but about being present enough to notice what's normal and what's not," Namutebi advises