Support for Chronically Ill Learners
Helping such children cope at school
Why should we be aware of them?

• Their struggle to participate & learn can be very difficult.

• South African School Health Policy protects against discrimination & acknowledges the right to education.

• Strong relationship between children’s physical health and their growth, development and learning

• Poor physical health can result in poor self esteem
• Stressful situations can exacerbate some health conditions
• Social & cognitive development affected
• Movement is reduced
What is chronic illness in a child?

Any disease which interferes with daily functioning & the child’s activities for more than three months a year.

Children who are unwell are often:
- Irritable and worried
- Weepy
- Unable to concentrate or pay attention
- Often seen as lazy & disinterested

Chronic illness affects the whole family
- Siblings may feel left out
- Caregiver burnout and stress
Communication with parents/caregivers is essential

Very important - information may be confidential

Regular contact should be maintained. The child’s condition may change

- medication changed
- Check re precautions for outings or other school events.
- Sick children may be absent – arrangements re sending work home
Develop an Action Plan

This plan will:

• describe symptoms to look out for
• provide specific information about the management of the illness
• if necessary, provide information about medication to be given and specific dietary requirements.
• give written permission to manage serious situations during the school day.
• Provide contact details and names of health personnel in case more information or help is needed.

This information must be easily accessible.
Encourage Resilience

The capacity to overcome the odds and develop the personal strengths needed to cope with hardship or adversity.

The development of resilience in children is facilitated by a protective environment at school

Practical tips on how to do this:

• No labelling or self fulfilling prophecy
• Do not decide what sick children can and cannot do.
• Safeguard the rights of all children, especially sick ones. This means maintaining confidentiality at all times.
• Watch for additional health problems and barriers
• Be flexible - make allowances and change routines
• Watch for bullying, teasing or isolating children

• Send absent children written messages/ drawings from classmates to decrease their loneliness.

• Work to de-stigmatise illnesses such as HIV and AIDS and epilepsy in your school and broader community

• The teacher-learner relationship is centrally important where the teacher models resilience
Classroom support

- Use Co-operative learning groups
- Use Multi-level Teaching: Chronic illness affects learners’ achievement levels. Multi-level teaching looks at the strengths of learners, & recognises varied abilities. One lesson is used - learners work on the same topic but at different levels.
- The kind and amount of curriculum differentiation needed can only be decided after a thorough assessment of learners.

Ask yourself practical questions:
- “How long does the learner stay away from school?
- Does the medication make him/her sleepy or less alert?
- Is he/she experiencing any discomfort? What will make it easier for him/her to learn?”
Individual support plans

Drawn up in consultation with the school support team, district support personnel, parents and, if appropriate, the learner.

The ISP describes:
• the actions that need to be taken to address a learner’s additional support needs
• sets targets to be achieved
• strategies and resources required to meet these targets
• the criteria by which achievement will be measured
• the person(s) responsible
• the date for review.
Protective factors continued:

- Building strong school - family links
- Taking advantage of opportunities for positive community involvement
- Involvement in community service - development of resilient characteristics - resourcefulness, initiative, goal setting & pro-social values.

Developing skills in resourcefulness:

- Knowing strengths & limitations. Keep trying
- Setting, planning and achieving realistic goals - sense of optimism & positive self esteem – I CAN do it!
- Decision making & creative problem solving
- Adaptive distancing from distressing & unalterable situations
• Children with well developed social skills & healthy self esteem are resilient.

• Emotional literacy is a recognised protective factor

Management of stress in children
• Children react to stress in line with developmental level.

• The adjustments children make show a coping style. A successful coping style reduces painful stress.

• An unsuccessful coping style results in feelings of incompetence, discomfort, frustration and/or disappointment.
Dealing with Death

Be as honest as possible with children

**Strategies for support**

- Most children stay optimistic if those around them have a positive attitude.
- Give support when facing changes. Accept feelings of discouragement but depression can stop recovery.
- Encourage the development of new interests.
- Provide as much certainty as possible by giving explanations the child can understand.
- Teach the child how to handle stress in different circumstances with positive coping styles.
- Encourage parents/friends to help child understand the situation by speaking about it.
Concluding remarks

Life is a bumpy journey & some learners experience extraordinary challenges. Therefore the greater the number of protective resources in their lives, the more likely they are to cope.