Parents of young children used over the counter medication to alleviate symptoms and to change children’s behaviour


**MAIN FINDINGS**
All of the parents gave paracetamol (acetaminophen) to their children. The next most commonly used medications were sedating antihistamines (eg, cough and cold preparations). Most parents used combinations of these medications at different times. The most common indications for the use of paracetamol were teething and hyperpyrexia. Mothers used indirect signs of warm or flushed appearance, lethargy, bad temper, and complaints of soreness to indicate that their children were feeling unwell. Colds or runny noses were treated with a range of antihistamines (most often promethazine).

3 themes emerged regarding the use of OTC medication. (1) Social medication. Parents would often use medication because of its known side effects rather than its intended purpose. In this way, they would use medications pre-emptively based on signs such as a grumpy, overtired, or unhappy child. (2) Behaviour change. Paracetamol was used to deal with several problems. Mothers administered paracetamol to calm children, to enhance sleep, and to ward off sad feelings when they felt ill. (3) Reducing parental inconvenience. Social medication made travel easier, allowed mothers to leave their children in the care of others, and “maintained the sanity” of parents. Most mothers found that OTC medications helped them to maintain routines and control over their lives. They could travel long distances with children when they used sedating antihistamines. They could leave the child in the care of another person or send them to school when the child was unhappy because the medication changed behaviour. OTC medication also helped the child sleep when parents were exhausted and needed a good night’s sleep themselves. Some parents used OTC medication to help break a child’s cycle of bad sleeping habits.

**CONCLUSIONS**
Many parents of children <5 years of age used over the counter medication not only to alleviate illness symptoms but also to change children’s behaviour, which helped parents have control over their lives. Paracetamol and antihistamines were most commonly used because of a perception of their calming and sedating properties.